OLD MAN'S WAR SERIES

John Scalzi

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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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OLD MAN'S WAR

John Scalzi

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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To Regan Avery, first reader extraordinaire,
And always to Kristine and Athena.

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PART I

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ONE

I did two things on my seventy-fifth birthday. I visited my wife's grave. Then I joined the army.

Visiting Kathy's grave was the less dramatic of the two.

She's buried in Harris Creek Cemetery, not more than a mile down the road from where I live and where we raised our family. Getting her into the cemetery was more difficult than perhaps it should have been; neither of us expected needing the burial, so neither of us made the arrangements. It's somewhat mortifying, to use a rather apt word, to have to argue with a cemetery manager about your wife not having made a reservation to be buried. Eventually my son, Charlie, who happens to be mayor, cracked a few heads and got the plot. Being the father of the mayor has its advantages.

So, the grave. Simple and unremarkable, with one of those small markers instead of a big headstone. As a contrast, Kathy lies next to Sandra Cain, whose rather oversized headstone is polished black granite, with Sandy's high school photo and some maudlin quote from Keats about the death of youth and beauty sandblasted into the front. That's Sandy all over. It would have amused Kathy to know Sandra was parked next to her with her big dramatic headstone; all their lives Sandy nurtured an entertainingly passive-aggressive competition with her. Kathy would come to the local bake sale with a pie, Sandy would bring three and simmer, not so subtly, if Kathy's pie sold first. Kathy would attempt to solve the problem by preemptively buying one of Sandy's

pies. It's hard to say whether this actually made things better or worse, from Sandy's point of view.

I suppose Sandy's headstone could be considered the last word in the matter, a final show-up that could not be rebutted, because, after all, Kathy was already dead. On the other hand, I don't actually recall anyone visiting Sandy. Three months after Sandy passed, Steve Cain sold the house and moved to Arizona with a smile as wide as Interstate 10 plastered on his skull. He sent me a postcard some time later; he was shacking up with a woman down there who had been a porn star fifty years earlier. I felt unclean for a week after getting that bit of information. Sandy's kids and grandkids live one town over, but they might as well be in Arizona for as often as they visit. Sandy's Keats quote probably hadn't been read by anyone since the funeral but me, in passing, as I move the few feet over to my wife.

Kathy's marker has her name (Katherine Rebecca Perry), her dates, and the words: BELOVED WIFE AND MOTHER. I read those words over and over every time I visit. I can't help it; they are four words that so inadequately and so perfectly sum up a life. The phrase tells you nothing about her, about how she met each day or how she worked, about what her interests were or where she liked to travel. You'd never know what her favorite color was, or how she liked to wear her hair, or how she voted, or what her sense of humor was. You'd know nothing about her except that she was loved. And she was. She'd think that was enough.

I hate visiting here. I hate that my wife of forty-two years is dead, that one minute one Saturday morning she was in the kitchen, mixing a bowl of waffle batter and talking to me about the dustup at the library board meeting the night before, and the next minute she was on the floor, twitching as the stroke tore through her brain. I hate that her last words were "Where the hell did I put the vanilla."

I hate that I've become one of those old men who visits a cemetery to be with his dead wife. When I was (much) younger I used to ask Kathy what the point would be. A pile of rotting meat and bones that used to be a person isn't a person anymore; it's just a pile of rotting meat and bones. The person is gone—off to heaven or hell or wherever

or nowhere. You might as well visit a side of beef. When you get older you realize this is still the case. You just don't care. It's what you have.

For as much as I hate the cemetery, I've been grateful it's here, too. I miss my wife. It's easier to miss her at a cemetery, where she's never been anything but dead, than to miss her in all the places where she was alive.

I didn't stay long; I never do. Just long enough to feel the stab that's still fresh enough after most of eight years, the one that also serves to remind me that I've got other things to do than to stand around in a cemetery like an old, damned fool. Once I felt it, I turned around and left and didn't bother looking around. This was the last time I would ever visit the cemetery or my wife's grave, but I didn't want to expend too much effort in trying to remember it. As I said, this is the place where she's never been anything but dead. There's not much value in remembering that.

Although come to think of it, signing up for the army wasn't all that dramatic either.

My town was too small for its own recruiting office. I had to drive into Greenville, the county seat, to sign up. The recruiting office was a small storefront in a nondescript strip mall; there was a state liquor authority store on one side of it and a tattoo parlor on the other. Depending on what order you went into each, you could wake up the next morning in some serious trouble.

The inside of the office was even less appealing, if that's possible. It consisted of a desk with a computer and a printer, a human behind that desk, two chairs in front of the desk and six chairs lining a wall. A small table in front of those chairs held recruiting information and some back issues of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Kathy and I had been in here a decade earlier, of course; I suspect nothing had been moved, much less changed, and that included the magazines. The human appeared to be new. At least I don't remember the previous recruiter having that much hair. Or breasts.

The recruiter was busy typing something on the computer and didn't bother to look up as I came in. "Be right with you," she

muttered, by way of a more or less Pavlovian response to the door opening.

"Take your time," I said. "I know the place is packed." This attempt at marginally sarcastic humor went ignored and unappreciated, which has been par for the course for the last few years; good to see I had not lost my form. I sat down in front of the desk and waited for the recruiter to finish whatever she was doing.

"You coming or going?" she asked, still without actually looking up at me.

"Pardon me?" I said.

"Coming or going," she repeated. "Coming in to do your Intent to Join sign-up, or going out to start your term?"

"Ah. Going out, please."

This finally got her to look at me, squinting out through a rather severe pair of glasses. "You're John Perry," she said.

"That's me. How did you guess?"

She looked back to her computer. "Most people who want to enlist come in on their birthday, even though they have thirty days afterward to formally enlist. We only have three birthdays today. Mary Valory already called to say she won't be going. And you don't look like you'd be Cynthia Smith."

"I'm gratified to hear that," I said.

"And since you're not coming in for an initial sign-up," she continued, ignoring yet another stab at humor, "it stands to reason you're John Perry."

"I could just be a lonely old man wandering around looking for conversation," I said.

"We don't get many of those around here," she said. "They tend to be scared off by the kids next door with the demon tattoos." She finally pushed her keyboard away and gave me her full attention. "Now, then. Let's see some ID, please."

"But you already know who I am," I reminded her.

"Let's be sure," she said. There was not even the barest hint of a smile when she said this. Dealing with garrulous old farts every day had apparently taken its toll.

I handed over my driver's license, birth certificate and national identity card. She took them, reached into her desk for a handpad, plugged it into the computer and slid it over to me. I placed my hand on it palm down and waited for the scan to finish. She took the pad and slid my ID card down the side to match the print information. "You're John Perry," she said, finally.

"And now we're back where we started," I said.

She ignored me again. "Ten years ago during your Intent to Join orientation session, you were provided information concerning the Colonial Defense Forces, and the obligations and duties you would assume by joining the CDF," she said, in the tone of voice which indicated that she said this at least once a day, every day, most of her working life. "Additionally, in the interim period, you have been sent refresher materials to remind you of the obligations and duties you would be assuming.

"At this point, do you need additional information or a refresher presentation, or do you declare that you fully understand the obligations and duties you are about to assume? Be aware there is no penalty either for asking for refresher materials or opting not to join the CDF at this time."

I recalled the orientation session. The first part consisted of a bunch of senior citizens sitting on folding chairs at the Greenville Community Center, eating donuts and drinking coffee and listening to a CDF apparatchik drone on about the history of human colonies. Then he handed out pamphlets on CDF service life, which appeared to be much like military life anywhere. During the question and answer session we found out he wasn't actually in the CDF; he'd just been hired to provide presentations in the Miami valley area.

The second part of the orientation session was a brief medical exam —a doctor came in and took blood, swabbed the inside of my cheek to dislodge some cells, and gave me a brain scan. Apparently I passed. Since then, the pamphlet I was provided at the orientation session was sent to me once a year through the mail. I started throwing it out after the second year. I hadn't read it since.

"I understand," I said.

She nodded, reached into her desk, pulled out a piece of paper and a pen, and handed both to me. The paper held several paragraphs, each with a space for a signature underneath. I recognized the paper; I had signed another, very similar paper ten years earlier to indicate that I understood what I would be getting into a decade in the future.

"I'm going to read to you each of the following paragraphs," she said. "At the end of each paragraph, if you understand and accept what has been read to you, please sign and date on the line immediately following the paragraph. If you have questions, please ask them at the end of each paragraph reading. If you do not subsequently understand or do not accept what has been read and explained to you, do not sign. Do you understand?"

"I understand," I said.

"Very good," she said. "Paragraph one: I the undersigned acknowledge and understand that I am freely and of my own will and without coercion volunteering to join the Colonial Defense Forces for a term of service of not less than two years in length. I additionally understand that the term of service may be extended unilaterally by the Colonial Defense Forces for up to eight additional years in times of war and duress."

This "ten years total" extension clause was not news to me—I did read the information I was sent, once or twice—although I wondered how many people glossed over it, and of those who didn't, how many people actually thought they'd be stuck in the service ten years. My feeling on it was that the CDF wouldn't ask for ten years if it didn't feel it was going to need them. Because of the Quarantine Laws, we don't hear much about colonial wars. But what we do hear is enough to know it's not peacetime out there in the universe.

I signed.

"Paragraph two: I understand that by volunteering to join the Colonial Defense Forces, I agree to bear arms and to use them against the enemies of the Colonial Union, which may include other human forces. I may not during the term of my service refuse to bear and use arms as ordered or cite religious or moral objections to such actions in order to avoid combat service."

How many people volunteer for an army and then claim conscientious objector status? I signed.

"Paragraph three: I understand and agree that I will faithfully and with all deliberate speed execute orders and directives provided to me by superior officers, as provided for in the Uniform Code of Colonial Defense Forces Conduct."

I signed.

"Paragraph four: I understand that by volunteering for the Colonial Defense Forces, I consent to whatsoever medical, surgical or therapeutic regimens or procedures are deemed necessary by the Colonial Defense Forces to enhance combat readiness."

Here it was: Why I and countless other seventy-five-year-olds signed up every year.

I once told my grandfather that by the time I was his age they'd have figured out a way to dramatically extend the human life span. He laughed at me and told me that's what he had assumed, too, and yet there he was, an old man anyway. And here I am as well. The problem with aging is not that it's one damn thing after another—it's every damn thing, all at once, all the time.

You can't stop aging. Gene therapies and replacement organs and plastic surgery give it a good fight. But it catches up with you anyway. Get a new lung, and your heart blows a valve. Get a new heart, and your liver swells up to the size of an inflatable kiddie pool. Change out your liver, a stroke gives you a whack. That's aging's trump card; they still can't replace brains.

Life expectancy climbed up near the ninety-year mark a while back, and that's where it's been ever since. We eked out almost another score from the "three score and ten" and then God seems to have put his foot down. People can live longer, and do live longer—but they still live those years as an old person. Nothing much has ever changed about that.

Look, you: When you're twenty-five, thirty-five, forty-five or even fifty-five, you can still feel good about your chances to take on the world. When you're sixty-five and your body is looking down the road at imminent physical ruin, these mysterious "medical, surgical and therapeutic regimens and procedures" begin to sound interesting. Then

you're seventy-five, friends are dead, and you've replaced at least one major organ; you have to pee four times a night, and you can't go up a flight of stairs without being a little winded—and you're told you're in pretty good shape for your age.

Trading that in for a decade of fresh life in a combat zone begins to look like a hell of a bargain. Especially because if you don't, in a decade you'll be eighty-five, and then the only difference between you and a raisin will be that while you're both wrinkled and without a prostate, the raisin never had a prostate to begin with.

So how does the CDF manage to reverse the flow of aging? No one down here knows. Earthside scientists can't explain how they do it, and can't replicate their successes, though it's not for the lack of trying. The CDF doesn't operate on-planet, so you can't ask a CDF veteran. However, the CDF only recruits on-planet, so the colonists don't know, either, even if you could ask them, which you can't. Whatever therapies the CDF performs are done off-world, in the CDF's own authority zones, away from the purview of global and national governments. So no help from Uncle Sam or anyone else.

Every once in a while, a legislature or president or dictator decides to ban CDF recruiting until it reveals its secrets. The CDF never argues; it packs up and goes. Then all the seventy-five-year-olds in that country take long international vacations from which they never return. The CDF offers no explanations, no rationales, no clues. If you want to find out how they make people young again, you have to sign up.

I signed.

"Paragraph five: I understand that by volunteering for the Colonial Defense Forces, I am terminating my citizenship in my national political entity, in this case the United States of America, and also the Residential Franchise that allows me to reside on the planet Earth. I understand that my citizenship will henceforth be transferred generally to the Colonial Union and specifically to the Colonial Defense Forces. I further recognize and understand that by terminating my local citizenship and planetary Residential Franchise, I am barred from subsequent return to Earth and, upon completion of my term of service within the Colonial Defense Forces, will be relocated to whatsoever

colony I am allotted by the Colonial Union and/or the Colonial Defense Forces."

More simply put: You can't go home again. This is part and parcel of the Quarantine Laws, which were imposed by the Colonial Union and the CDF, officially at least, to protect Earth from any more xenobiological disasters like The Crimp. Folks on the Earth were all for it at the time. Funny how insular a planet will become when a third of its male population permanently loses its fertility within the space of a year. People here are less enthused about it now—they've gotten bored with Earth and want to see the rest of the universe, and they've forgotten all about childless Great Uncle Walt. But the CU and CDF are the only ones with spaceships that have the skip drives that make interstellar travel possible. So there it is.

(This makes the agreement to colonize where the CU tells you to colonize something of a moot point—since they're the only ones with the ships, you go where they take you anyway. It's not as if they're going to let you drive the starship.)

A side effect of the Quarantine Laws and the skip drive monopoly is to make communication between Earth and the colonies (and between the colonies themselves) all but impossible. The only way to get a timely response from a colony is to put a message onto a ship with a skip drive; the CDF will grudgingly carry messages and data for planetary governments this way, but anyone else is out of luck. You could put up a radio dish and wait for communication signals from the colonies to wash by, but Alpha, the closest colony to Earth, is eighty-three light-years away. This makes lively gossip between planets difficult.

I've never asked, but I would imagine that it is this paragraph that causes the most people to turn back. It's one thing to think you want to be young again; it's quite another thing to turn your back on everything you've ever known, everyone you've ever met or loved, and every experience you've ever had over the span of seven and a half decades. It's a hell of a thing to say good-bye to your whole life.

I signed.

"Paragraph six—final paragraph," the recruiter said. "I recognize and understand that as of seventy-two hours of the final signing of this

document, or my transport off Earth by the Colonial Defense Forces, whichever comes first, I will be presumed as deceased for the purposes of law in all relevant political entities, in this case the State of Ohio and the United States of America. Any and all assets remaining to me will be dispensed with according to law. All legal obligations or responsibilities that by law terminate at death will be so terminated. All previous legal records, be they meritorious or detrimental, will be hereby stricken, and all debts discharged according to law. I recognize and understand that if I have not yet arranged for the distribution of my assets, that at my request the Colonial Defense Forces will provide me with legal and financial counsel to do so within seventy-two hours."

I signed. I now had seventy-two hours to live. So to speak.

"What happens if I don't leave the planet within seventy-two hours?" I said as I handed the paper back to the recruiter.

"Nothing," she said, taking the form. "Except that since you're legally dead, all your belongings are split up according to your will, your health and life benefits are canceled or disbursed to your heirs and being legally dead, you have no legal right to protection under the law from everything from libel to murder."

"So someone could just come up and kill me, and there would be no legal repercussions?"

"Well, no," she said. "If someone were to murder you while you were legally dead, I believe that here in Ohio they could be tried for 'disturbing a corpse.'"

"Fascinating," I said.

"However," she continued, in her ever-more-distressing matter-of-fact tone, "it usually doesn't get that far. Anytime between now and the end of those seventy-two hours you can simply change your mind about joining. Just call me here. If I'm not here, an automated call responder will take your name. Once we've verified it's actually you requesting cancellation of enlistment, you'll be released from further obligation. Bear in mind that such cancellation permanently bars you from future enlistment. This is a onetime thing."

"Got it," I said. "Do you need to swear me in?"

"Nope," she said. "I just need to process this form and give you your ticket." She turned back to her computer, typed for a few minutes,

and then pressed the ENTER key. "The computer is generating your ticket now," she said. "It'll be a minute."

"Okay," I said. "Mind if I ask you a question?"

"I'm married," she said.

"That wasn't what I was going to ask," I said. "Do people really proposition you?"

"All the time," she said. "It's really annoying."

"Sorry about that," I said. She nodded. "What I was going to ask was if you've actually ever met anyone from CDF."

"You mean apart from enlistees?" I nodded. "No. The CDF has a corporation down here that handles recruiting, but none of us are actual CDF. I don't think even the CEO is. We get all our information and materials from the Colonial Union embassy staff and not the CDF directly. I don't think they come Earthside at all."

"Does it bother you to work for an organization you never met?"

"No," she said. "The work is okay and the pay is surprisingly good, considering how little money they've put in to decorate around here. Anyway, you're going to join an organization you've never met. Doesn't that bother you?"

"No," I admitted. "I'm old, my wife is dead and there's not much reason to stay here anymore. Are you going to join when the time comes?"

She shrugged. "I don't mind getting old."

"I didn't mind getting old when I was young, either," I said. "It's the being old now that's getting to me."

Her computer printer made a quiet hum and a business card–like object came out. She took it and handed it to me. "This is your ticket," she said to me. "It identifies you as John Perry and a CDF recruit. Don't lose it. Your shuttle leaves from right in front of this office in three days to go to the Dayton Airport. It departs at 8:30 A.M.; we suggest you get here early. You'll be allowed only one carry-on bag, so please choose carefully among the things you wish to take.

"From Dayton, you'll take the eleven A.M. flight to Chicago and then the two P.M. delta to Nairobi from there. They're nine hours ahead in Nairobi, so you'll arrive there about midnight, local time. You'll be met by a CDF representative, and you'll have the option of either

taking the two A.M. beanstalk to Colonial Station or getting some rest and taking the nine A.M. beanstalk. From there, you're in the CDF's hands."

I took the ticket. "What do I do if any of these flights is late or delayed?"

"None of these flights has ever experienced a single delay in the five years I've worked here," she said.

"Wow," I said. "I'll bet the CDF's trains run on time, too."

She looked at me blankly.

"You know," I said, "I've been trying to make jokes to you the entire time I've been here."

"I know," she said. "I'm sorry. My sense of humor was surgically removed as a child."

"Oh," I said.

"That was a joke," she said, and stood up, extending her hand.

"Oh." I stood up and took it.

"Congratulations, recruit," she said. "Good luck to you out there in the stars. I actually mean that," she added.

"Thank you," I said, "I appreciate it." She nodded, sat back down again, and flicked her eyes back to the computer. I was dismissed.

On the way out I saw an older woman walking across the parking lot toward the recruiting office. I walked over to her. "Cynthia Smith?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "How did you know?"

"I just wanted to say happy birthday," I said, and then pointed upward. "And that maybe I'll see you again up there."

She smiled as she figured it out. Finally, I made someone smile that day. Things were looking up.

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TWO

Nairobi was launched from underneath us, and dropped away; we walked over to the side as if on a fast elevator (which is of course exactly what the beanstalk is) and watched the Earth begin its slide.

"They look like ants from up here!" Leon Deak cackled as he stood next to me. "Black ants!"

I had the strong urge to crack open a window and hurl Leon out of it. Alas, there was no window to crack; the beanstalk's "window" was the same diamond composite materials as the rest of the platform, made transparent so travelers could sightsee below them. The platform was airtight, which would be a handy thing in just a few minutes, when we were high enough up that cracking a window would lead to explosive decompression, hypoxia and death.

So Leon would not find himself making a sudden and entirely unexpected return to the Earth's embrace. More's the pity. Leon had attached himself to me in Chicago like a fat, brat-and-beer-filled tick; I was amazed that someone whose blood was clearly half pork grease had made it to age seventy-five. I spent part of the flight to Nairobi listening to him fart and expound darkly on his theory of the racial composition of the colonies. The farts were the most pleasant part of that monologue; never had I been so eager to purchase headphones for the in-flight entertainment.

I'd hoped to ditch him by opting to take the first 'stalk out of Nairobi. He seemed like the kind of guy who'd need a rest after busily passing gas all day. No such luck. The idea of spending another six

hours with Leon and his farts was more than I could take; if the beanstalk platform *had* windows and I couldn't hurl Leon out of one, I might have jumped myself. Instead, I excused myself from Leon's presence by telling him the only thing that seemed to hold him at bay, which was by saying I had to go relieve myself. Leon grunted his permission. I wandered off counterclockwise, in the general direction of the rest rooms but more specifically to see if I could find a place where Leon might not find me.

This was not going to be easy to do. The 'stalk platform was donut-shaped, with a diameter of about one hundred feet. The "hole" of the donut, where the platform slid up the 'stalk, was about twenty feet wide. The cable's diameter was obviously slightly less than that; perhaps about eighteen feet, which if you thought about it hardly seemed thick enough for a cable several thousand miles long. The rest of the space was filled with comfortable booths and couches where people could sit and chat, and small areas where travelers could watch entertainment, play games or eat. And of course there were lots of window areas to look out of, either down to the Earth, across to other 'stalk cables and platforms, or up toward Colonial Station.

Overall the platform gave the impression of being the lobby of a pleasant economy hotel, suddenly launched toward geostationary orbit. The only problem was that the open design made it difficult to hide. The launch was not heavily subscribed; there weren't enough other passengers to hide by blending in. I finally decided to get something to drink at a kiosk near the center of the platform, roughly opposite of where Leon was standing. Sight lines being what they were, that's where I stood the best chance of avoiding him the longest.

Leaving Earth physically had been an irritating thing, thanks to Leon's obnoxiousness, but leaving it emotionally had been surprisingly easy. I had decided a year before my departure that, yes, I *would* join the CDF; from there it was simply a matter of making arrangements and saying good-byes. When Kathy and I had originally decided to join up a decade earlier, we put the house in our son Charlie's name as well as our own, so that he could take possession of it without having to go through probate. Kathy and I otherwise owned nothing of any real value, just the bric-a-brac that you pile up in a life. Most of the really

nice stuff was dispersed to friends and family over the last year; Charlie would deal with the rest of it later.

Leaving people was not that much harder. People reacted to the news with varying levels of surprise and sadness, since everyone knows that once you join the Colonial Defense Forces, you don't come back. But it's not entirely like dying. They know that somewhere out there, you're still alive; heck, maybe after a while, they might even come and join you. It's a little what I imagine people felt hundreds of years ago when someone they knew hitched up a wagon and headed west. They cried, they missed them, they got back to what they were doing.

Anyway, I told people a whole year before I left that I was going. That's a lot of time to say what you have to say, to settle matters and to make your peace with someone. Over the course of the year, I had had a few sit-downs with old friends and family and did a final poking of old wounds and ashes; in nearly every case it ended well. A couple of times I asked forgiveness for things I didn't particularly feel sorry about, and in one case I found myself in bed with someone who otherwise I'd rather I hadn't. But you do what you have to do to give people closure; it makes them feel better and it doesn't cost you much to do it. I'd rather apologize for something I didn't really care about, and leave someone on Earth wishing me well, than to be stubborn and have that someone hoping that some alien would slurp out my brains. Call it karmic insurance.

Charlie had been my major concern. Like many fathers and sons, we'd had our go-rounds; I wasn't the most attentive father, and he wasn't the most self-directed son, wandering through life well into his thirties. When he originally found out that Kathy and I intended to join, he'd exploded at us. He reminded us that we'd protested against the Subcontinental War. He reminded us that we'd always taught him violence wasn't the answer. He reminded us that we'd once grounded him for a month when he'd gone out target shooting with Bill Young, which we both thought was a little odd for a man of thirty-five to bring up.

Kathy's death ended most of our battles, because both he and I realized that most of the things we argued about simply didn't matter; I was a widower and he a bachelor, and for a while he and I were all we

had left. Not long thereafter he met and married Lisa, and about a year after that he became a father and was reelected mayor all in one very hectic night. Charlie had been a late bloomer, but it was a fine bloom. He and I had our own sit-down where I apologized for some things (sincerely), and also told him equally sincerely how proud I was of the man he'd become. Then we sat on the porch with our beers, watched my grandson Adam swat a t-ball in the front yard, and talked about nothing of any importance for a nice long time. When we parted, we parted well and with love, which is what you want between fathers and sons.

I stood there by the kiosk, nursing my Coke and thinking about Charlie and his family, when I heard Leon's voice grumbling, followed by another voice, low, sharp and female, saying something in response. In spite of myself, I peered over past the kiosk. Leon had apparently managed to corner some poor woman and was no doubt sharing whatever dumb-ass theory his beef-witted brain stem was promulgating at the moment. My sense of chivalry overcame my desire to hide; I went to intervene.

"All I'm *saying*," Leon was saying, "is that it's not exactly *fair* that you and I and every American has to wait until we're older than *shit* to get *our* chance to go, while all those little Hindis get carted off to brand-new worlds as fast as they can *breed*. Which is pretty damn quick. That's just not *fair*. Does it seem *fair* to you?"

"No, it doesn't seem particularly fair," the woman said back. "But I suppose they wouldn't see it as *fair* that we wiped New Delhi and Mumbai off the face of the planet, either."

"That's exactly my point!" Leon exclaimed. "We *nuked* the dot heads! We *won* that war! Winning should *count* for something. And now look what happens. They *lost,* but they get to go colonize the universe, and the only way *we* get to go is if we sign up to protect them! Excuse me for saying so, but doesn't the Bible say, 'The meek shall inherit the earth'? I'd say losing a goddamn war makes you pretty damn *meek*."

"I don't think that phrase means what you think it does, Leon," I said, approaching the two of them.

"John! See, here's a man who knows what I'm talking about," Leon said, grinning my way.

The woman turned to face me. "You know this gentleman?" she asked me, with an undercurrent in her voice that implied that if I did, there was clearly something wrong with me.

"We met on the trip to Nairobi," I said, gently raising an eyebrow to indicate that he wasn't my companion of choice. "I'm John Perry," I said.

"Jesse Gonzales," she said.

"Charmed," I replied, and then turned to Leon. "Leon," I said, "you've got the saying wrong. The actual saying is from the Sermon on the Mount, and it says, '*Blessed* are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.' Inheriting the earth is meant to be a reward, not a punishment."

Leon blinked, then snorted. "Even so, we *beat* them. We kicked their little brown asses. *We* should be colonizing the universe, not them."

I opened my mouth to respond, but Jesse beat me to the punch. "'Blessed are they which are persecuted, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven,'" she said, speaking to Leon but looking sidelong at me.

Leon gaped for a minute at the both of us. "You can't be *serious,*" he said, after a minute. "There's nothing in the *Bible* that says *we* should be stuck on Earth while a bunch of *brownies,* which don't even *believe* in Jesus, thank you very much, fill up the galaxy. And it certainly doesn't say anything about us *protecting* the little bastards while they do it. Christ, I had a son in that war. Some dot head shot off one of his balls! His *balls*! They *deserved* what they got, the sons of bitches. Don't ask me to be *happy* that now *I'll* have to save their sorry asses up there in the colonies."

Jesse winked at me. "Would you like to field this one?"

"If you don't mind," I said.

"Oh, not at all," she replied.

"'But I say unto you, Love your enemies,'" I quoted. "'Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father who is in Heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise

on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.'"

Leon turned lobster red. "You're both out of your fucking gourds," he said, and stomped off as fast as his fat would carry him.

"Thank you, Jesus," I said. "And this time I mean it literally."

"You're pretty handy with a Bible quotation," Jesse said. "Were you a minister in your past life?"

"No," I said. "But I lived in a town of two thousand people and fifteen churches. It helped to be able to speak the language. And you don't have to be religious to appreciate the Sermon on the Mount. What's your excuse?"

"Catholic school religion class," she said. "I won a ribbon for memorization in the tenth grade. It's amazing what your brain can keep in storage for sixty years, even if these days I can't remember where I parked when I go to the store."

"Well, in any event, let me apologize for Leon," I said. "I barely know him, but I know enough to know he's an idiot."

"'Judge not, that ye be not judged,'" Jesse said, and shrugged. "Anyway, he's only saying what a lot of people believe. I think it's stupid and wrong, but that doesn't mean I don't understand it. I wish that there had been a different way for me to see the colonies than to wait an entire life and have to join the military for it. If I could have been a colonist when I was younger, I would have."

"You're not joining for a life of military adventure, then," I said.

"Of course not," Jesse said, a little scornfully. "Did *you* join because you have a great desire to fight a war?"

"No," I said.

She nodded. "Neither did I. Neither did most of us. Your friend Leon certainly didn't join to be in the military—he can't stand the people we will protect. People join because they're not ready to die and they don't want to be old. They join because life on Earth isn't interesting past a certain age. Or they join to see someplace new before they die. That's why I joined, you know. I'm not joining to fight or be young again. I just want to see what it's like to be somewhere *else.*"

She turned to look out the window. "Of course, it's funny to hear me say that. Do you know that until yesterday, I'd never been out of

the state of Texas my entire life?"

"Don't feel bad about it," I said. "Texas *is* a big state."

She smiled. "Thank you. I don't really feel bad about it. It's just funny. When I was a child, I used to read all the 'Young Colonist' novels and watch the shows, and dreamed about raising Arcturian cattle and battling vicious land worms on colony Gamma Prime. Then I got older and realized that colonists came from India and Kazakhstan and Norway, where they can't support the population they have, and the fact I was born in America meant that I wouldn't get to go. And that there weren't actually Arcturian cattle or land worms! I was *very* disappointed to learn that when I was twelve."

She shrugged again. "I grew up in San Antonio, went 'away' to college at the University of Texas, and then took a job back in San Antonio. I got married eventually, and we took our vacations on the Gulf Coast. For our thirtieth anniversary, my husband and I planned to go to Italy, but we never went."

"What happened?"

She laughed. "His *secretary* is what happened. *They* ended up going to Italy on their honeymoon. I stayed home. On the other hand, they both ended up getting shellfish poisoning in Venice, so it's just as well I never went. But I didn't worry much about traveling after that. I knew I was going to join up as soon as I could, and I did, and here I am. Although now I wish I *had* traveled more. I took the delta from Dallas to Nairobi. That was *fun.* I wish I had done it more than once in my life. Not to mention *this*"—she waved her hand at the window, toward the beanstalk cables—"which I never thought I would ever want to ride in my life. I mean, what's keeping this cable *up*?"

"Belief," I said. "You believe that it won't fall and it won't. Try not to think about it too much or we're all in trouble."

"What I believe," Jesse said, "is that I want to get something to eat. Care to join me?"

"Belief," Harry Wilson said, and laughed. "Well, maybe belief *is* holding up this cable. Because it sure as hell isn't fundamental physics."

Harry Wilson had joined Jesse and me at a booth where we were eating. "You two look like you know each other, and that's one up on everyone else here," he said to us as he came up. We invited him to join us and he accepted gratefully. He had taught physics at a Bloomington, Indiana, high school for twenty years, he said, and the beanstalk had been intriguing him the entire time we had been riding it.

"What do you mean physics isn't holding it up?" Jesse said. "Believe me, this is not what I want to hear right at this moment."

Harry smiled. "Sorry. Let me rephrase. Physics *is* involved in holding up this beanstalk, certainly. But the physics involved aren't of the garden variety. There's a lot going on here that doesn't make sense on the surface."

"I feel a physics lecture coming on," I said.

"I taught physics to teenagers for years," Harry said, and dug out a small notepad and a pen. "It'll be painless, trust me. Okay, now look." Harry began drawing a circle at the bottom of the page. "This is the Earth. And this"—he drew a smaller circle halfway up the page—"is Colonial Station. It's in geosynchronous orbit, which means it stays put relative to the Earth's rotation. It's always hanging above Nairobi. With me so far?"

We nodded.

"Okay. Now, the idea behind the beanstalk is that you connect Colonial Station with the Earth through a 'beanstalk'—a bunch of cables, like those out the window—and a bunch of elevator platforms, like the one we're on now, that can travel back and forth." Harry drew a line signifying the cable, and a small square, signifying our platform. "The idea here is that elevators on these cables don't have to reach escape velocity to get to Earth orbit, like a rocket payload would. This is good for us, because we don't have to go to Colonial Station feeling like an elephant had its foot on our chests. Simple enough.

"The thing is, this beanstalk doesn't conform to the basic physical requirements of a classic Earth-to-space beanstalk. For one thing"—Harry drew an additional line past Colonial Station to the end of the page—"Colonial Station shouldn't be at the *end* of the beanstalk. For reasons that have to do with mass balance and orbital dynamics, there should be additional cable extending tens of thousands of miles past

Colonial Station. Without this counterbalance, any beanstalk should be inherently unstable and dangerous."

"And you're saying this one isn't," I said.

"Not only is *not* unstable, it's probably the safest way to travel that's ever been devised," Harry said. "The beanstalk has been in continuous operation for over a century. It's the only point of departure for colonists. There's never been an accident due to instability or matériel failure, which would be related to instability. There was the famous beanstalk bombing forty years ago, but that was sabotage, unrelated to the physical structure of the beanstalk itself. The beanstalk itself is admirably stable and has been since it was built. But according to basic physics, it shouldn't be."

"So what is keeping it up?" Jesse said.

Harry smiled again. "Well, that's the question, isn't it."

"You mean you don't know?" Jesse asked.

"*I* don't know," Harry admitted. "But that in itself should be no cause for alarm, since I am—or was—merely a high school physics teacher. However, as far as I know, no one *else* has much of a clue how it works, either. On Earth, I mean. Obviously the Colonial Union knows."

"Well, how can that be?" I asked. "It's been here for a century, for God's sake. No one's bothered to figure out how it actually works?"

"I didn't say *that*," Harry said. "Of course they've been trying. And it's not like it's been a secret all these years. When the beanstalk was being built, there were demands by governments and the press to know how it worked. The CU essentially said 'figure it out,' and that was that. In physics circles, people have been trying to solve it ever since. It's called 'The Beanstalk Problem.'"

"Not a very original title," I said.

"Well, physicists save their imagination for other things." Harry chuckled. "The point is, it *hasn't* been solved, primarily for two reasons. The first is that it's incredibly complicated—I've pointed out the mass issues, but then there are other issues like cable strength, beanstalk oscillations brought on by storms and other atmospheric phenomena, and even an issue about how cables are supposed to taper.

Any of these is massively difficult to solve in the real world; trying to figure them all out at once is impossible."

"What's the second reason?" Jesse asked.

"The second reason is that there's no reason to. Even if we did figure out how to build one of these things, we couldn't *afford* to build it." Harry leaned back. "Just before I was a teacher, I worked for General Electric's civil engineering department. We were working on the SubAtlantic rail line at the time, and one of my jobs was to go through old projects and project proposals to see if any of the technology or practices had application to the SubAtlantic project. Sort of a hail-Mary attempt to see if we could do anything to bring down costs."

"General Electric bankrupted itself on that, didn't they?" I asked.

"Now you know why they wanted to bring down costs," Harry said. "And why I became a teacher. General Electric couldn't afford me, or much of anyone else, right after that. Anyway, I'm going through old proposals and reports and I get into some classified stuff, and one of the reports is for a beanstalk. General Electric had been hired by the U.S. Government for a third-party feasibility study on building a beanstalk in the Western Hemisphere; they wanted to clear out a hole in the Amazon the size of Delaware and stick it right on the equator.

"General Electric told them to forget it. The proposal said that even assuming some major technological breakthroughs—most of which *still* haven't happened, and none of which approach the technology that has to be involved with *this* beanstalk—the budget for the beanstalk would be *three times* the annual gross national product of the United States economy. That's assuming that the project did not run over budget, which of course it almost certainly would have. Now, this was twenty years ago, and the report I saw was a decade old even then. But I don't expect that the costs have gone down very much since then. So no new beanstalks—there are cheaper ways of getting people and material into orbit. *Much* cheaper."

Harry leaned forward again. "Which leads to two obvious questions: How did the Colonial Union manage to create *this* technological monstrosity, and why did they bother with it at all?"

"Well, obviously, the Colonial Union is more technologically advanced than we are here on Earth," Jesse said.

"Obviously," Harry said. "But why? Colonists are human, after all. Not only that, but since the colonies specifically recruit from impoverished countries with population problems, colonists tend to be poorly educated. Once they get to their new homes, you have to assume they're spending more time staying alive than they are thinking up creative ways to build beanstalks. And the primary technology that allowed interstellar colonization is the skip drive, which was developed right here on Earth, and which has been substantially unimproved for more than a century. So on the face of it, there's no reason why the colonists should be any more technologically advanced than we are."

Something suddenly clicked in my head. "Unless they cheat," I said.

Harry grinned. "Exactly. That's what I think, too."

Jesse looked at me, and then Harry. "I'm not following you two," she said.

"They cheat," I said. "Look, on Earth, we're bottled up. We only learn from ourselves—we make discoveries and refine technology all the time, but it's slow, because we do all the work ourselves. But up there—"

"Up there humans meet other intelligent species," Harry said. "Some of which almost certainly have technology more advanced than ours. We either take it in trade or reverse engineer it and find out how it works. It's much easier to figure out how something works when you've got something to work from than it is to figure it out on your own."

"That's what makes it cheating," I said. "The CU is reading off someone else's notes."

"Well, why doesn't the Colonial Union share what it's discovered with us?" Jesse asked. "What's the point of keeping it to themselves?"

"Maybe they think that what we don't know can't hurt us," I said.

"Or it's something else entirely," Harry said, and waved toward the window, where the beanstalk cables slid by. "This beanstalk isn't here because it's the easiest way to get people to Colonial Station, you know. It's here because it's one of the most *difficult*—in fact, the *most* expensive, *most* technologically complex and *most* politically

intimidating way to do it. Its very presence is a reminder that the CU is literally light-years ahead of anything humans can do here."

"I've never found it intimidating," Jesse said. "I really never thought about it much at all."

"The message isn't aimed at you," Harry said. "If you were President of the United States, however, you'd think of it differently. After all, the CU keeps us all here on Earth. There's no space travel except what the CU allows through colonization or enlistment. Political leaders are always under pressure to buck the CU and get their people to the stars. But the beanstalk is a constant reminder. It says, 'Until you can make one of these, don't even *think* of challenging us.' And the beanstalk is the only technology the CU has decided to show us. Think about what they *haven't* let us know about. I can guarantee you the U.S. President has. And that it keeps him and every other leader on the planet in line."

"None of this is making me feel friendly toward the Colonial Union," Jesse said.

"It doesn't have to be sinister," Harry said. "It could be that the CU is trying to protect Earth. The universe is a big place. Maybe we're not in the best neighborhood."

"Harry, were you always this paranoid," I asked, "or was this something that crept up on you as you got older?"

"How do you think I made it to seventy-five?" Harry said, and grinned. "Anyway, I don't have any problems with the CU being much more technologically advanced. It's about to work to my advantage." He held up an arm. "Look at this thing," he said. "It's flabby and old and not in very good shape. Somehow, the Colonial Defense Forces are going to take this arm—and the rest of me—and whip it into fighting shape. And do you know how?"

"No," I said. Jesse shook her head.

"Neither do I," Harry said, and let his arm down with a *plop* onto the table. "I have *no* idea how they'll make it work. What's more, it's likely that I can't even *imagine* how they'll do it—if we assume that we've been held in a state of technological infancy by the CU, trying to explain it to me now would be like trying to explain this beanstalk platform to someone who's never seen a mode of transportation more

complex than a horse and buggy. But they've obviously made it work. Otherwise, why would they recruit seventy-five-year-olds? The universe isn't going to be conquered by legions of geriatrics. No offense," he added quickly.

"None taken," Jesse said, and smiled.

"Lady and gentleman," Harry said, looking at the both of us, "we may think we have some idea of what we're getting into, but I don't think we have the first clue. This beanstalk exists to tell us that much. It's bigger and stranger than we can imagine—and it's just the first part of this journey. What comes next is going to be even bigger and stranger. Prepare yourself as best you can."

"How dramatic," Jesse said dryly. "I don't know how to prepare myself after a statement like that."

"I do," I said, and scooted over to get out of the booth. "I'm going to go pee. If the universe is bigger and stranger than I can imagine, it's best to meet it with an empty bladder."

"Spoken like a true Boy Scout," Harry said.

"A Boy Scout wouldn't need to pee as much as I do," I said.

"Sure he would," Harry said. "Just give him sixty years."

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THREE

"I don't know about you two," Jesse was saying to me and Harry, "but so far this really isn't what I expected the army to be."

"It's not so bad," I said. "Here, have another donut."

"I don't need another donut," she said, taking the donut anyway. "What I need is some sleep."

I knew what she meant. It had been more than eighteen hours since I left home, nearly all of it consumed with travel. I was ready for a nap. Instead I was sitting in the huge mess hall of an interstellar cruiser, having coffee and donuts with about a thousand other recruits, waiting for someone to come and tell us what we were supposed to do next. *That* part, at least, was pretty much like the military I expected.

The rush and wait began on arrival. As soon as we got off the beanstalk platform, we were greeted by two Colonial Union apparatchiks. They informed us that we were the last recruits expected for a ship that was leaving soon, so could we please follow them quickly so that everything could stay on schedule. Then one took the lead and one went to the rear and they effectively and rather insultingly herded several dozen senior citizens across the entire station to our ship, the CDFS *Henry Hudson.*

Jesse and Harry were clearly disappointed at the rush job, as was I. Colonial Station was huge—over a mile in diameter (1800 meters, actually, and I suspected that after seventy-five years of life, I would finally have to start getting used to the metric system) and served as the

sole port of transport for recruits and colonists alike. Being herded across it without being able to stop and take it in was like being five years old and being hustled through a toy store at Christmas time by a harried parent. I felt like plopping down on the floor and having a tantrum until I got my way. I was unfortunately too old (or alternately, not nearly old enough) to get away with that sort of behavior.

What I did see on our speedy trek was a tantalizing appetizer. As our apparatchiks poked and prodded us along, we passed a huge holding bay filled to capacity with what I would guess were Pakistanis or Muslim Indians. Most were waiting patiently to gain entrance to shuttles that would take them to an immense colony transport ship, one of which was visible in the distance, floating outside the window. Others could be seen arguing with CU officials about one thing or another in accented English, comforting children who were clearly bored, or digging through their belongings for something to eat. In one corner, a group of men were kneeling on a carpeted area of the bay and praying. I wondered briefly how they had determined where Mecca was from twenty-three thousand miles up, and then we were pushed forward and I lost sight of them.

Jesse tugged on my sleeve and pointed to our right. In a small mess area, I caught a glimpse of something tentacled and blue, holding a martini. I alerted Harry; he was so intrigued that he went back and looked, much to the consternation of the trailing apparatchik. She shooed Harry back into the herd with a sour look on her face. Harry, on the other hand, was grinning like a fool. "A Gehaar," he said. "It was eating a buffalo wing when I looked in. *Disgusting.*" Then he giggled. The Gehaar were one of the first intelligent aliens humans encountered, in the days before the Colonial Union established its monopoly on space travel. Nice enough people, but they ate by injecting their food with acid from dozens of thin head tentacles and then noisily slurping the resulting goop into an orifice. Messy.

Harry didn't care. He'd spotted his first live alien.

Our meander reached its conclusion as we approached a holding bay with the words "*Henry Hudson/CDF Recruits*" glowing from a flight display. Our group gratefully took seats while our apparatchiks went to talk with some other Colonials waiting by the shuttle gate

door. Harry, who was clearly showing a tendency toward curiosity, wandered over to the bay window to look at our ship. Jesse and I wearily got up and followed him. A small informational monitor at the window helped us find it among the other traffic.

The *Henry Hudson* was not actually docked at the gate, of course; it's hard to make a hundred-thousand-metric-ton interstellar spacecraft move daintily in tandem with a revolving space station. As with the colony transports, it maintained a reasonable distance while supplies, passengers and crew were transported back and forth by rather more manageable shuttles and barges. The *Hudson* itself was stationed a few miles out and above the station, not the massive, unesthetically functional spoked-wheel design of the colony transports, but sleeker, flatter and, importantly, not at all cylindrical or wheel-shaped. I mentioned this to Harry, who nodded. "Full-time artificial gravity," he said. "And stable over a large field. Very impressive."

"I thought we were using artificial gravity on the way up," Jesse said.

"We were," Harry said. "The beanstalk platform's gravity generators were increasing their output the higher up we went."

"So what's so different about a spaceship using artificial gravity?" Jesse asked.

"It's just extremely difficult," Harry said. "It takes an enormous amount of energy to create a gravitational field, and the amount of energy you have to put out increases exponentially with the radius of the field. They probably cheated by creating multiple, smaller fields instead of one larger field. But even that way, creating the fields in our beanstalk platform probably took more energy than it took to light your hometown for a month."

"I don't know about that," Jesse said. "I'm from San Antonio."

"Fine. *His* hometown, then," Harry said, jerking a thumb toward me. "Point is, it's an incredibly wasteful use of energy, and in most situations where artificial gravity is required, it's simpler and *much* less expensive just to create a wheel, spin it and let that stick people and things to the inside rim. Once you've spun up, you only need to put minimal additional energy into the system to compensate for friction.

As opposed to creating an artificial gravity field, which needs a constant and significant output of energy."

He pointed to the *Henry Hudson.* "Look, there's a shuttle next to the *Hudson.* Using that as a scale, I'm guessing the *Hudson* is 800 feet long, 200 feet wide and about 150 feet deep. Creating a single artificial gravity field around *that* baby would definitely dim the lights in San Antonio. Even multiple fields would be an amazing drain on power. So either they have a power source that can keep the gravity on and still run all the ship's other systems, like propulsion and life support, or they've found a new, low-energy way to create gravity."

"It's probably not cheap," I said, and pointed to a colony transport to the right of the *Henry Hudson.* "Look at the colony ship. It's a wheel. And Colonial Station is spinning, too."

"The colonies are saving their best technology for the military," Jesse said. "And *this* ship is just being used to pick up new recruits. I think you're right, Harry. We have no idea what we've gotten ourselves into."

Harry grinned, and turned back to look at the *Henry Hudson,* lazily circling as Colonial Station turned. "I love it when people come around to my way of thinking."

Our apparatchiks presently herded us up again and got us in line to board the shuttle. We presented our identity cards to the CU official at the shuttle gate, who entered us on a list while a counterpart presented us with a personal data assistant. "Thanks for being on Earth, here's a lovely parting gift," I said to him. He didn't seem to get it.

The shuttles did not come equipped with artificial gravity. Our apparatchiks harnessed us in and warned us that under no circumstances were we to try to unlock ourselves; to make sure that the more claustrophobic of us didn't do just that, the locks on the harnesses would not be under our control during the flight. So that solved that problem. The apparatchiks also passed out plastic hairnets to anyone with hair long enough to warrant them; in free fall, long hair apparently goes everywhere.

If anyone felt nauseated, we were told, they were to use the vomit bags in the side pocket of their seats. Our apparatchiks stressed the importance of not waiting until the last second to use the vomit bags. In weightlessness, vomit would float around and irritate the other passengers, making the original vomiter very unpopular for the rest of the flight and possibly the rest of his or her military career. This was followed by a rustling sound as several of our number readied themselves. The woman next to me clutched her vomit bag tightly. I mentally prepared myself for the worst.

There was no vomit, thankfully, and the ride to the *Henry Hudson* was pretty smooth; after the initial *shit, I'm falling* signal my brain shot out when the gravity gave way, it was more like a gentle, extended roller-coaster ride. We made it to the ship in about five minutes; there was a minute or two of docking negotiations as a shuttle bay door irised open, accepted the shuttle, and closed again. This was followed by another few minutes of waiting as air was pumped back into the bay. Then a slight tingle, and the sudden reappearance of weight; the artificial gravity had kicked in.

The shuttle bay door opened and a wholly new apparatchik appeared. "Welcome to the CDFS *Henry Hudson,*" she said. "Please unlatch yourselves, gather your belongings, and follow the lighted path out of the shuttle bay. The air will be pumped out of this bay in precisely seven minutes—to launch this shuttle and allow another shuttle to dock—so please be quick."

We were all surprisingly quick.

We were then led to the massive *Henry Hudson* mess hall, where we were invited to have some coffee and donuts and to relax. An official would be along to explain things. While we were waiting, the mess hall had begun to fill up with other recruits who had presumably boarded before us; after an hour there were hundreds of us milling about. I had never seen so many old people in one place at one time. Neither had Harry. "It's like Wednesday morning at the world's biggest Denny's," he said, and then got himself more coffee.

Just about the time that my bladder was informing me that I had overdone it with the coffee, a distinguished-looking gentleman in Colonial diplomatic blues entered the mess hall and made his way

toward the front of the room. The noise level in the room began to subside; you could tell that people were relieved that someone was finally there to tell them what the hell was going on.

The man stood there for a few minutes until the room was silent. "Greetings," he said, and we all jumped. He must have had a body mike; his voice was coming through speakers in the wall. "I'm Sam Campbell, Colonial Union adjunct for the Colonial Defense Forces. Although technically speaking I am not a member of the Colonial Defense Forces, I have been empowered by the CDF to manage your orientation on its behalf, so for the next few days, you can consider me your superior officer. Now, I know many of you have just arrived on the last shuttle and are anxious to get some rest; others have been on ship for up to a day and are equally anxious to know what comes next. For the sake of both groups, I will be brief.

"In about an hour, the CDFS *Henry Hudson* will break orbit and ready for her initial skip to the Phoenix system, where we stop briefly to pick up additional supplies before we head to Beta Pyxis III, where you will begin your training. Don't worry, I don't expect any of this to mean anything to you now. What you need to know is that it will take us a little more than two days to get to our initial skip point, and during that time, you will be undergoing a series of mental and physical evaluations at the hands of my staff. Your schedule is now being downloaded into your PDA. Please review it at your convenience. Your PDA can also direct you to every place you need to go, so you should never worry about getting lost. Those of you who have just arrived on the *Henry Hudson* will also find your stateroom assignments on your PDA.

"Other than finding your way to your staterooms, nothing is expected of you this evening. Many of you have been traveling for quite a while, and we want you to be rested for tomorrow's evaluations. Speaking of which, now is a good time to get you onto ship's time, which is on Colonial Universal Standard Time. It is now"—he checked his watch—"2138 Colonial. Your PDA is set for ship time. Your day begins tomorrow with breakfast mess from 0600 to 0730, followed by a physical evaluation and enhancement. Breakfast mess is not mandatory

—you're not on military schedule yet—but you'll be having a long day tomorrow, so I do strongly suggest you attend.

"If you have any questions, your PDA can port into the *Henry Hudson* information system and use the AI interface to assist you; just use your stylus to write the question or speak it into your PDA's microphone. You will also find Colonial Union staff on each stateroom deck; please don't hesitate to ask them for assistance. Based on your personal information, our medical staff is already aware of any issues or needs you may have, and may have made appointments to see you this evening in your staterooms. Check your PDA. You may also visit sick bay at your convenience. This mess hall will be open all night tonight, but will begin normal operating hours as of tomorrow. Again, check your PDA for times and menus. Finally, as of tomorrow you should all be wearing CDF recruit gear; it is now being delivered to your staterooms."

Campbell stopped for a second and gave us all what I think he thought was a significant stare. "On behalf of the Colonial Union and the Colonial Defense Forces, I welcome you as new citizens and our newest defenders. God bless you all and keep you safe in what's to come.

"Incidentally, if you want to watch while we break orbit, we will be porting the video into our observation deck theater. The theater is quite large and can accommodate all recruits, so don't worry about seating. The *Henry Hudson* makes excellent speed, so by breakfast tomorrow the Earth will be a very small disk, and by dinner, nothing more than a bright point in the sky. This will probably be your last chance to see what was your homeworld. If that means something to you, I suggest you drop by."

"So, how is your new roommate?" Harry asked me, taking the seat next to me in the observation deck theater.

"I really don't want to talk about it," I said. I had used my PDA to navigate to my stateroom, where I found my roommate already stowing his belongings: Leon Deak. He glanced over, said, "Oh, look, it's the Bible freak," and then studiously ignored me, which took some

doing in a room that was ten by ten. Leon had already taken the bottom bunk (which, to seventy-five-year-old knees at least, is the desirable bunk); I threw my carry-on onto the top bunk, took my PDA and went to get Jesse, who was on the same deck. Her roommate, a nice lady by the name of Maggie, bowed out of watching the *Henry Hudson* break orbit. I told Jesse who my roommate was; she just laughed.

She laughed again when she related the story to Harry, who sympathetically patted me on the shoulder. "Don't feel too bad. It's only until we get to Beta Pyxis."

"Wherever *that* is," I said. "How is your roommate?"

"I couldn't tell you," Harry said. "He was already asleep when I got there. Took the bottom bunk, too, the bastard."

"My roommate was simply lovely," Jesse said. "She offered me a homemade cookie when I met her. Said her granddaughter had made them as a going-away gift."

"She didn't offer *me* a cookie," I said.

"Well, she doesn't have to live with *you,* now does she."

"How was the cookie?" Harry asked.

"It was like an oatmeal rock," Jesse said. "But that's not the point. The point is, I have the best roommate of us all. I'm special. Look, there's the Earth." She pointed as the theater's tremendous video screen flickered to life. The Earth hung there in astounding fidelity; whoever built the video screen had done a bang-up job.

"I wish I had this screen in my living room," Harry said. "I'd have had the most popular Super Bowl parties on the block."

"Just look at it," I said. "All our lives, it's the only place we've ever been. Everyone we ever knew or loved was there. And now we're leaving it. Doesn't that make you feel something?"

"Excited," Jesse said. "And sad. But not too sad."

"Definitely not too sad," Harry said. "There was nothing left to do there but get older and die."

"You can still die, you know," I said. "You *are* joining the military."

"Yeah, but I'm not going to die *old,*" Harry said. "I'm going to have a second chance to die young and leave a beautiful corpse. It makes up for missing out on it the first time."

"You're just a romantic that way," Jesse said, deadpan.

"Damn right," Harry said.

"Listen," I said. "We've begun pulling out."

The speakers of the theater broadcast the chatter between the *Henry Hudson* and Colonial Station as they negotiated the terms of the *Henry Hudson*'s departure. Then came a low thrum and the slightest of vibrations, which we could barely feel through our seats.

"Engines," Harry said. Jesse and I nodded.

And then the Earth slowly began to shrink in the video screen, still massive, and still brilliant blue and white, but clearly, inexorably, beginning to take up a smaller portion of the screen. We silently watched it shrink, all of the several hundred recruits who came to look. I looked over to Harry, who, despite his earlier blustering, was quiet and reflective. Jesse had a tear on her cheek.

"Hey," I said, and gripped her hand. "Not too sad, remember?"

She smiled at me and gripped my hand. "No," she said hoarsely. "Not too sad. But even still. Even still."

We sat there some more and watched everything we ever knew shrink in the viewscreen.

• • •

I had my PDA set to wake me up at 0600, which it did by gently piping music through its little speakers and gradually increasing the volume until I woke. I turned off the music, quietly lowered myself off the top bunk and then rooted for a towel in the wardrobe, flicking on the small light in the wardrobe to see. In the wardrobe hung my and Leon's recruit suits: two sets each of Colonial light blue sweat tops and bottoms, two light blue T-shirts, two pairs blue chino-style drawstring pants, two pairs white socks and briefs-style underwear, and blue sneakers. Apparently we'd have no need for formal dress between now and Beta Pyxis. I slipped on a pair of sweat bottoms and a T-shirt, grabbed one of the towels that was also hanging in the wardrobe, and padded down the hall for a shower.

When I returned, the lights were glowing on full but Leon was still in his bunk—the lights must have come on automatically. I put a sweat top over my T-shirt and added socks and sneakers to my ensemble; I was ready to jog or, well, whatever else I had to do that day. Now for

some breakfast. On the way out, I gave Leon a little nudge. He was a schmuck, but even schmucks might not want to sleep through food. I asked him if he wanted to get some breakfast.

"What?" he said, groggily. "No. Leave me alone."

"You sure, Leon?" I asked. "You know what they say about breakfast. It's the most important meal of the day, and all that. Come on. You need your energy."

Leon actually growled. "My mother's been dead for thirty years and as far I know, she hasn't been brought back in your body. So get the hell out of here and let me sleep."

It was nice to see Leon hadn't gone soft on me. "Fine," I said. "I'll be back after breakfast."

Leon grunted and rolled back over. I went to breakfast.

Breakfast was amazing, and I say that having been married to a woman who could make a breakfast spread that would have made Gandhi stop a fast. I had two Belgian waffles that were golden, crisp and light, wallowing in powdered sugar and syrup that tasted like real Vermont maple (and if you think you can't tell when you have Vermont maple syrup, you've never had it) and with a scoop of creamery butter that was artfully melting to fill the deep wells of the waffle squares. Add over-easy eggs that were actually over easy, four slices of thick, brown sugar–cured bacon, orange juice from fruit that apparently hadn't realized it had been squeezed, and a mug of coffee that was fresh off the burro.

I thought I had died and gone to heaven. Since I was now officially legally dead on Earth and flying across the solar system in a spaceship, I guess I wasn't too far off.

"Oh my," the fellow I sat next to at breakfast said, as I put down my fully-loaded tray. "Look at all the fats on that tray. You're asking for a coronary. I'm a doctor, I know."

"Uh-huh," I said, and pointed to his tray. "That looks like a four-egg omelet you're working on there. With about a pound each of ham and cheddar."

"'Do as I say, not as I do.' That was my creed as a practicing physician," he said. "If more patients had listened to me instead of

following my sorry example, they'd be alive now. A lesson for us all. Thomas Jane, by the way."

"John Perry," I said, shaking hands.

"Pleased to meet you," he said. "Although I'm sad, too, since if you eat all that you'll be dead of a heart attack within the hour."

"Don't listen to him, John," said the woman across from us, whose own plate was smeared with the remains of pancakes and sausage. "Tom there is just trying to get you to give him some of your food, so he doesn't have to get back in line for more. That's how I lost half of my sausage."

"That accusation is as irrelevant as it is true," Thomas said indignantly. "I admit to coveting his Belgian waffle, yes. I won't deny that. But if sacrificing my own arteries will prolong his life, then it's worth it to me. Consider this the culinary equivalent of falling on a grenade for the sake of my comrade."

"Most grenades aren't soaked in syrup," she said.

"Maybe they should be," Thomas said. "We'd see a lot more selfless acts."

"Here," I said, sawing off half of a waffle. "Throw yourself on this."

"I'll launch myself face first," Thomas promised.

"We're all deeply relieved to hear that," I said.

The woman on the other side of the table introduced herself as Susan Reardon, late of Bellevue, Washington. "What do you think of our little space adventure so far?" she asked me.

"If I had known the cooking was this good, I would have found some way to sign up years ago," I said. "Who knew army food would be like this."

"I don't think we're in the army *quite* yet," Thomas said, around a mouthful of Belgian waffle. "I think this is sort of the Colony Defense Forces waiting room, if you know what I mean. Real army food is going to be a lot more spare. Not to mention I doubt we'll be prancing around in sneakers like we are right now."

"You think they're easing us into things, then," I said.

"I do," Thomas said. "Look, there are a thousand complete strangers on this ship, all of whom are now without home, family, or

profession. That's a hell of a mental shock. The least they can do is give us a fabulous meal to take our minds off it all."

"John!" Harry had spied me from the line. I waved him over. He and another man came, bearing trays.

"This is my roommate, Alan Rosenthal," he said, by way of introduction.

"Formerly known as Sleeping Beauty," I said.

"About half of that description is right," Alan said. "I am in fact devastatingly beautiful." I introduced Harry and Alan to Susan and Thomas.

"Tsk, tsk," Thomas said, examining their trays. "Two more plaque attacks waiting to happen."

"Better throw Tom a couple bacon strips, Harry," I said. "Otherwise we'll never hear the end of this."

"I resent the implication that I can be bought off with food," Thomas said.

"It wasn't implied," Susan said. "It was pretty much boldly stated."

"Well, I know your roommate lottery turned out badly," Harry said to me, handing over two bacon strips to Thomas, who accepted them gravely, "but mine turned out all right. Alan here is a theoretical physicist. Smart as a whip."

"And devastatingly beautiful," Susan piped in.

"Thanks for remembering that detail," Alan said.

"This looks like a table of reasonably intelligent adults," Harry said. "So what do you think we're in for today?"

"I have a physical scheduled for 0800," I said. "I think we all do."

"Right," Harry said. "But I'm asking what you all think that *means*. Do you think today is the day we start our rejuvenation therapies? Is today the day we begin to stop being old?"

"We don't know that we stop being *old*," Thomas said. "We've all assumed that, because we think of soldiers as being young. But think about it. None of us has actually seen a Colonial soldier. We've assumed, and our assumptions could be way off."

"What would the value of old soldiers be?" Alan asked. "If they're going to put me in the field as is, I don't know what good I'm going to be to anyone. I have a bad back. Walking from the beanstalk platform

to the flight gate yesterday just about killed me. I can't imagine marching twenty miles with a pack and a firearm."

"I think we're due for some repairs, obviously," Thomas said. "But that's not the same as being made 'young' again. I'm a doctor, and I know a little bit about this. You can make the human body work better and achieve high function at any age, but each age has a certain baseline capability. The body at seventy-five is inherently less fast, less flexible and less easily repaired than at younger ages. It can still do some amazing things, of course. I don't want to brag, but I'll have you know that back on Earth I regularly ran ten K races. I ran one less than a month ago. And I made better time than I would have when I was fifty-five."

"What were you like when you were fifty-five?" I asked.

"Well, that's the thing," Thomas said. "I was a fat slob at fifty-five. It took a heart replacement to get me serious about taking care of myself. My point is that a high-functioning seventy-five-year-old can actually do many things without actually being 'young,' but just by being in excellent shape. Maybe that's all that's required for this army. Maybe all the other intelligent species in the universe are pushovers. Presuming that's the case, it makes a weird sort of sense to have *old* soldiers, because young people are more useful to their community. They have their whole lives ahead of them, while *we* are eminently expendable."

"So maybe we'll still be old, just really, really healthy," Harry said.

"That's what I'm saying," Thomas said.

"Well, stop saying that. You're bringing me down," Harry said.

"I'll shut up if you give me your fruit cup," Thomas said.

"Even if we're turned into high-functioning seventy-five-year-olds, as you say," Susan said, "we'd still be getting older. In five years, we'd just be high-functioning eighty-year-olds. There's an upper limit to our usefulness as soldiers."

Thomas shrugged. "Our terms are for two years. Maybe they only need to keep us in working order for that long. The difference between seventy-five and seventy-seven isn't as great as between seventy-five and eighty. Or even between seventy-seven and eighty. Hundreds of

thousands of us sign up each year. After two years, they just swap us out with a crew of 'fresh' recruits."

"We can be retained for up to ten years," I said. "It's in the fine print. That would seem to argue that they have the technology to keep us working for that period of time."

"And they've got our DNA on file," Harry said. "Maybe they've cloned replacement parts or something like that."

"True," Thomas admitted. "But it's a lot of work to transplant every single organ, bone, muscle and nerve from a cloned body to ours. And they'd still have to contend with our brains, which can't be transplanted."

Thomas looked around and finally realized he was depressing the whole table. "I'm not saying that we *won't* be made young again," he said. "Just what we've seen on this ship convinces me that the Colonial Union has much better technology than we ever had back home. But speaking as a medical doctor, I'm having a hard time seeing how they'll reverse the aging process as dramatically as we all think they will."

"Entropy is a bitch," Alan said. "We've got theories to back *that* one up."

"There is one piece of evidence that suggests that they'll improve us no matter what," I said.

"Tell me quickly," Harry said. "Tom's theory of the galaxy's oldest army is ruining my appetite."

"That's just it," I said. "If they couldn't *fix* our bodies, they wouldn't be giving us food with a fat content that could kill most of us within the month."

"That's very true," Susan said. "You make an excellent point, there, John. I feel better already."

"Thank you," I said. "And based on this evidence, I have such faith in the Colonial Defense Forces to cure me of all my ills, that now I'm going back for seconds."

"Get me some pancakes while you're up," Thomas said.

"Hey, Leon," I said, giving his flabby bulk a push. "Get up. Sleepy time is over. You've got an eight o'clock appointment."

Leon lay on his bed like a lump. I rolled my eyes, sighed and bent down to give him a harder push. And noticed his lips were blue.

Oh, shit, I thought, and shook him. Nothing. I grabbed his torso and pulled him off his bunk to the floor. It was like moving dead weight.

I grabbed my PDA and called for medical help. Then I kneeled over him, blew into his mouth, and pumped on his chest until a pair of Colonial medical staffers arrived and pulled me off of him.

By this time a small crowd had gathered around the open door; I saw Jesse and reached out to bring her in. She saw Leon on the floor and her hand flew to her mouth. I gave her a quick hug.

"How is he?" I asked one of the Colonials, who was consulting his PDA.

"He's dead," he said. "He's been dead for about an hour. Looks like a heart attack." He put the PDA down and stood up, glancing back down at Leon. "Poor bastard. Made it this far just to have his ticker crap out."

"A last-minute volunteer for the Ghost Brigades," the other Colonial said.

I shot a hard stare at him. I thought a joke at this moment was in terribly bad taste.

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FOUR

"Okay, let's see," the doctor said, glancing at his rather large PDA as I entered the office. "You're John Perry, correct?"

"That's right," I said.

"I'm Dr. Russell," he said, and then looked me over.

"You look like your dog just died," he said.

"Actually," I said, "it was my roommate."

"Oh, yes," he said, glancing down at his PDA again. "Leon Deak. I would have been working on him right after you. Bad timing, that. Well, let's get that off the schedule, then." He tapped the PDA screen for a few seconds, smiled tightly when he was through. Dr. Russell's bedside manner left something to be desired.

"Now," he said, turning his attention back to me, "let's get you looked at."

The office consisted of Dr. Russell, me, a chair for the doctor, a small table and two crèches. The crèches were shaped for human contours, and each had a curving transparent door that arched over the contoured area. At the top of each crèche was an arm apparatus, with a cuplike attachment at the end. The "cup" looked just about large enough to fit on a human head. It was, quite frankly, making me a little nervous.

"Please go ahead and make yourself comfortable, and then we'll get started," Dr. Russell said, opening the door to the crèche nearest to me.

"Do you need me to take anything off?" I said. As far as I remembered, a physical examination required being looked at

physically.

"No," he said. "But if it makes you feel more comfortable, go right ahead."

"Does anyone actually strip if they don't have to?" I asked.

"Actually, yes," he said. "If you've been told to do something one way for so long, it's a hard habit to break."

I kept my togs on. I set my PDA on the table, stepped up to the crèche, turned around, leaned back and settled in. Dr. Russell closed the door and stepped back. "Hold on one second while I adjust the crèche," he said, and tapped his PDA. I felt the human-shaped depression in the crèche shift, and then conform to my dimensions.

"That was creepy," I said.

Dr. Russell smiled. "You're going to notice some vibration here," he said, and he was right.

"Say," I said while the crèche was thrumming gently underneath me, "those other fellows who were in the waiting room with me. Where did they go after they came in here?"

"Through the door over there." He waved a hand behind him without looking up from his PDA. "That's the recovery area."

"*Recovery* area?"

"Don't worry," he said. "I've just made the examination sound much worse than it is. In fact, we're just about done with your scan." He tapped his PDA again and the vibration stopped.

"What do I do now?" I asked.

"Just hold tight," Dr. Russell said. "We've got a little more to do, and we need to go over the results of your examination."

"You mean it's done?" I said.

"Modern medicine is wonderful, isn't it," he said. He showed me the PDA screen, which was downloading a summary of my scan. "You don't even have to say, 'Aaahhhh.'"

"Yeah, but how detailed can it be?"

"Detailed enough," he said. "Mr. Perry, when was your last physical examination?"

"About six months ago," I said.

"What was the prognosis from your physician?"

"He said I was in fine shape, other than my blood pressure being a little higher than normal. Why?"

"Well, he's basically right," said Dr. Russell, "although he seems to have missed the testicular cancer."

"Excuse me?" I said.

Dr. Russell flipped the PDA screen around again; this time it was showing a false-color representation of my genitals. It was the first time I'd ever had my own package waved in front of my face. "Here," he said, pointing to a dark spot on my left testicle. "There's the nodule. Pretty big sucker, too. It's cancer, all right."

I glared at the man. "You know, Dr. Russell, most doctors would have found a more tactful way to break the news."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Perry," Dr. Russell said. "I don't want to seem unconcerned. But it's really not a problem. Even on Earth, testicular cancer is easily treatable, particularly in the early stages, which is the case here. At the very worst, you'd lose the testicle, but that's not a significant setback."

"Unless you happen to own the testicle," I growled.

"That's more of a psychological issue," Dr. Russell said. "In any event, right here and right now, I don't want you to worry about it. In a couple of days you'll be getting a comprehensive physical overhaul, and we'll deal with your testicle then. In the meantime, there should be no problems. The cancer is still local to the testicle. It hasn't spread to the lungs or the lymph nodes. You're fine."

"Am I going to drop the ball?" I said.

Dr. Russell smiled. "I think you can hold on to the ball for now," he said. "Should you ever drop it, I suspect it will be the least of your concerns. Now, other than the cancer, which as I say isn't really problematic, you're in as good a shape as any man of your physical age could be. That's good news; we don't have to do anything else to you at this point."

"What would you do if you'd found something really wrong?" I asked. "I mean, what if the cancer had been terminal?"

"'Terminal' is a pretty imprecise term, Mr. Perry," Dr. Russell said. "In the long run, we're all terminal cases. In the case of this examination, what we're really looking to do is to stabilize any recruits

who are in imminent danger, so we know they'll make it through the next few days. The case of your unfortunate roommate Mr. Deak isn't all that unusual. We have a lot of recruits who make it to this point just to die before assessment. That's not good for any of us."

Dr. Russell consulted his PDA. "Now, in the case of Mr. Deak, who died of a heart attack, what we probably would have done would be to remove the plaque buildup from his arteries and provide him with an arterial wall-strengthening compound to prevent ruptures. That's our most common treatment. Most seventy-five-year-old arteries can use some propping up. In your case, if you had had advanced stage cancer, we would have trimmed back the tumors to a point where they didn't pose an imminent threat to your vital functions, and shored up the affected regions to make sure you wouldn't have any problems over the next few days."

"Why wouldn't you cure it?" I asked. "If you can 'shore up' an affected region, it sounds like you could probably fix it completely if you wanted to."

"We can, but it's not necessary," Dr. Russell said. "You'll be getting a more comprehensive overhaul in a couple of days. We just need to keep you going until then."

"What does 'comprehensive overhaul' mean, anyway?" I said.

"It means that when it's done, you'll wonder why you ever worried about a spot of cancer on your testicle," he said. "That's a promise. Now, there's one more thing we need to do here. Bring your head forward, please."

I did. Dr. Russell reached up and brought the feared arm cup down directly on the top of my head. "During the next couple of days, it's going to be important for us to get a good picture of your brain activity," he said, moving back. "So to do this, I'm going to implant a sensor array into your skull." As he said this, he tapped the screen on his PDA, an action I was learning to mistrust. There was a slight sucking noise as the cup adhered to my skull.

"How do you do that?" I asked.

"Well, right now, you can probably feel a little tickle on your scalp and down the back of your neck," Dr. Russell said, and I could. "Those are the injectors positioning themselves. They're like little hypodermic

needles that will insert the sensors. The sensors themselves are very small, but there's a lot of them. About twenty thousand, more or less. Don't worry, they're self-sterilizing."

"Is this going to hurt?" I asked.

"Not so much," he said, and tapped his PDA screen. Twenty thousand microsensors *slammed* themselves into my skull like four ax handles simultaneously whacking my skull.

"God *damn* it!" I grabbed my head, banging my hands against the crèche door as I did so. "You son of a bitch," I yelled at Dr. Russell. "You said it wouldn't *hurt!*"

"I said 'not so much,'" Dr. Russell said.

"Not so much as what? Having your head stepped on by an elephant?"

"Not so much as when the sensors connect to each other," Dr. Russell said. "The good news is that as soon as they're connected, the pain stops. Now hold still, this will only take a minute." He tapped the PDA again. Eighty thousand needles shot out in every direction in my skull.

I have never wanted to punch a doctor so much in my life.

"I don't know," Harry was saying. "I think it's an interesting look." And with this, Harry rubbed his head, which like all our heads was now a dusty speckled gray where twenty thousand subcutaneous sensors sat, measuring brain activity.

The breakfast crew had reconvened again at lunchtime, this time with Jesse and her roommate Maggie joining the crowd. Harry had declared that we now constituted an official clique, branded us the "Old Farts," and demanded we begin a food fight with the next table over. He was voted down, in no small part due to Thomas noting that any food we threw we wouldn't get to eat, and lunch was even better than breakfast, if that was possible.

"And a damned good thing, too," Thomas said. "After this morning's little brain injection, I was almost too pissed off to eat."

"I can't imagine that," Susan said.

"Notice how I said 'almost,'" Thomas said. "But I'll tell you what. I wish I'd had one of those crèches back home. Would have cut my appointment times by eighty percent. More time for golfing."

"Your devotion to your patients is overwhelming," Jesse said.

"Fah," Thomas said. "I played golf with most of them. They would have been all for it. And as much as it pains me to say it, it helped my doctor make a much better assessment than I ever could have. That thing is a diagnostician's dream. It caught a microscopic tumor on my pancreas. There's no way I could have caught that back home until it was a hell of a lot larger or a patient started showing symptoms. Did anyone else have anything surprising?"

"Lung cancer," Harry said. "Little spots."

"Ovarian cysts," Jesse said. Maggie seconded.

"Incipient rheumatoid arthritis," said Alan.

"Testicular cancer," I said.

Every man at the table winced. "Ouch," said Thomas.

"They tell me I'll live," I said.

"You'll just be lopsided when you walk," said Susan.

"That's enough of *that,*" I said.

"What I don't understand is why they didn't *fix* the problems," Jesse said. "My doctor showed me a cyst the size of a gumball, but told me not to concern myself with it. I don't think I'm cut out *not* to worry about something like that."

"Thomas, you're alleged to be a doctor," Susan said, and tapped her gray-shaded brow. "What's with these little bastards? Why not just give us a brain scan?"

"If I had to guess, which I do, since I really have no clue," Thomas said, "I'd say that they want to see our brains in action while we go through our training. But they can't do that with us strapped to a machine, so they're strapping the machines to us instead."

"Thanks for the cogent explanation of what I already figured out," Susan said. "What I'm asking is, what purpose does that sort of measurement serve?"

"I dunno," Thomas said. "Maybe they're fitting us for new brains after all. Or maybe they've got some way of adding new brain material, and they need to see what parts of our brains need a boost. I just hope

they don't need to put in another set of the damned things. The first set nearly killed me from the pain."

"Speaking of which," Alan said, turning to me, "I hear you lost your roommate this morning. Are you okay?"

"I'm all right," I said. "Though it's depressing. My doctor said that if he had managed to make it to his appointment this morning, they probably could have kept him from dying. Given him a plaque remover or something. I feel like I should have made him get up for breakfast. That might have kept him moving long enough to make it to his appointment."

"Don't kick yourself about it," Thomas said. "There's no way you could have known. People just die."

"Sure, but not days from getting a 'comprehensive overhaul,' as my doctor was putting it."

Harry piped in. "Not to be too crass about this—"

"You just know *this* is going to be bad," Susan said.

"—but when I went to college," Harry continued, throwing a piece of bread at Susan, "if your roommate died, you were usually allowed to skip your finals for that semester. You know, because of the trauma."

"And oddly enough, your roommate got to skip them, too," Susan said. "For much the same reason."

"I never thought of it that way," Harry said. "Anyway, think they might let you sit out the evaluations they have planned for today?"

"I doubt it," I said. "Even if they did, I wouldn't take up the offer. What else would I do, sit in my stateroom all day? Talk about depressing. Someone died there, you know."

"You could always move," Jesse said. "Maybe someone else's roommate died, too."

"There's a morbid thought," I said. "And anyway, I don't want to move. I'm sorry Leon's dead, of course. But now I have a room to myself."

"Looks like the healing process has begun," Alan said.

"I'm just trying to move past the pain," I said.

"You don't talk much, do you," Susan said to Maggie, rather suddenly.

"No," Maggie said.

"Hey, what does everyone have next on their schedule?" Jesse asked.

Everyone reached for their PDA, then stopped, guiltily.

"Let's think about just how high school that last moment really was," Susan said.

"Well, hell," Harry said, and pulled out his PDA anyway. "We've already joined a lunchroom clique. Might as well go all the way."

It turned out Harry and I had our first evaluation session together. We were directed to a conference room where chairs with desks had been set up.

"Holy crap," Harry said as we took our seats. "We really *are* back in high school."

This assessment was reinforced when our Colonial came into the room. "You will now be tested on basic language and mathematic skills," the proctor said. "Your first test is being downloaded into your PDA. It is multiple choice. Please answer as many questions as you can within the thirty-minute time limit. If you finish before your thirty minutes are up, please sit quietly or review your answers. Please do not collaborate with other trainees. Please begin now."

I looked down at my PDA. A word analogy question was on it.

"You have *got* to be kidding," I said. Other people in the room were chuckling as well.

Harry raised his hand. "Ma'am?" he said. "What's the score I need to get into Harvard?"

"I've heard that one before," the Colonial said. "Everyone, please settle down and work on your test."

"I've been waiting sixty years to raise my math score," Harry said. "Let's see how I do now."

Our second assessment was even worse.

"Please follow the white square. Use only your eyes, not your head." The Colonial dimmed the lights in the room. Sixty pairs of eyes focused on a white square on the wall. Slowly, it began to move.

"I can't believe I went into space for this," Harry said.

"Maybe things will pick up," I said. "If we're lucky, we'll get another white square to look at."

A second white square appeared on the wall.

"You've been here before, haven't you?" Harry said.

Later, Harry and I separated, and I had some activities of my own.

The first room I was in featured a Colonial and a pile of blocks.

"Make a house out of these, please," the Colonial said.

"Only if I get an extra juice box," I said.

"I'll see what I can do," the Colonial promised. I made a house out of the blocks and then went into the next room, where the Colonial in there pulled out a sheet of paper and a pen.

"Starting from the middle of the maze, try to see if you can get to the outer edge."

"Jesus Christ," I said, "a drug-addled rat could do this."

"Let's hope so," the Colonial said. "Still, let's see you do it anyway."

I did. In the next room, the Colonial there wanted me to call out the numbers and letters. I learned to stop wondering why and just do what they told me.

A little later in the afternoon, I got pissed off.

"I've been reading your file," said the Colonial, a thin young man who looked like a strong wind would sail him off like a kite.

"Okay," I said.

"It says you were married."

"I was."

"Did you like it? Being married."

"Sure. It beats the alternative."

He smirked. "So what happened? Divorce? Fuck around one time too many?"

Whatever obnoxiously amusing qualities this guy had were fading fast. "She's dead," I said.

"Yeah? How did that happen?"

"She had a stroke."

"Gotta love a stroke," he said. "Bam, your brain's skull pudding, just like that. Good that she didn't survive. She'd be this fat, bedridden turnip, you know. You'd just have to feed her through a straw or something." He made slurping noises.

I didn't say anything. Part of my brain was figuring how quickly I could move to snap his neck, but most of me was just sitting there in blind shock and rage. I simply could not believe what I was hearing.

Down in some deep part of my brain, someone was telling me to start breathing again soon, or I was going to pass out.

The Colonial's PDA suddenly beeped. "Okay," he said, and stood up quickly. "We're done. Mr. Perry, please allow me to apologize for the comments I made regarding your wife's death. My job here is to generate an enraged response from the recruit as quickly as possible. Our psychological models showed that you would respond most negatively to comments like the ones I have just made. Please understand that on a personal level I would never make such comments about your late wife."

I blinked stupidly for a few seconds at the man. Then I roared at him. "What kind of sick, fucked-up test was THAT?!?"

"I agree it is an extremely unpleasant test, and once again I apologize. I am doing my job as ordered, nothing more."

"Holy Christ!" I said. "Do you have any idea how close I came to breaking your fucking neck?"

"In fact, I do," the man said in a calm, controlled voice that indicated that, in fact, he did. "My PDA, which was tracking your mental state, beeped right before you were about to pop. But even if it hadn't I would have known. I do this all the time. I know what to expect."

I was still trying to come down from my rage. "You do this thing with every recruit?" I asked. "How are you even still *alive?*"

"I understand that question," the man said. "I was in fact chosen for this assignment because my small build gives the recruit the impression that he or she can beat the hell out of me. I am a very good 'little twerp.' However, I am capable of restraining a recruit if I have to. Though usually I don't have to. As I said, I do this a lot."

"It's not a very nice job," I said. I had finally managed to get myself back into a rational state of mind.

"'It's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it,'" the man said. "I find it interesting, in that every recruit has a different thing that causes him or her to explode. But you're right. It's a high-stress assignment. It's not really for everyone."

"I bet you're not very popular in bars," I said.

"Actually, I'm told I'm quite charming. When I'm not intentionally pissing people off, that is. Mr. Perry, we're all finished here. If you'll step through the door to your right, you'll begin your next assessment."

"They're not going to try to piss me off again, are they?"

"You may become pissed off," the man said, "but if you do, it'll be on your own. We only do this test once."

I headed to the door, then stopped. "I know you were doing your job," I said. "But I still want you to know. My wife was a wonderful person. She deserves better than to be used like this."

"I know she does, Mr. Perry," the man said. "I know she does."

I went through the door.

In the next room, a very nice young lady, who happened to be completely naked, wanted me to tell her anything I could possibly remember about my seventh birthday party.

"I can't believe they showed us that film right before dinner," Jesse said.

"It wasn't right before dinner," Thomas said. "The Bugs Bunny cartoon was after that. Anyway, it wasn't so bad."

"Yes, well, maybe you're not utterly disgusted by a film on intestinal surgery, Mister Doctor, but the rest of us found it pretty disturbing," Jesse said.

"Does this mean you don't want your ribs?" Thomas said, pointing to her plate.

"Did anyone else get the naked woman asking about your childhood?" I asked.

"I got a man," Susan said.

"Woman," said Harry.

"Man," said Jesse.

"Woman," said Thomas.

"Man," said Alan.

We all looked at him.

"What?" Alan said. "I'm gay."

"What was the point of that?" I asked. "About the naked person, I mean, not about Alan being gay."

"Thanks," Alan said dryly.

"They're trying to provoke particular responses, that's all," said Harry. "All of today's tests have been of pretty basic intellectual or emotional responses, the foundation of more complex and subtle emotions and intellectual abilities. They're just trying to figure out how we think and react on a primal level. The naked person was obviously trying to get you all worked up sexually."

"But what was that whole thing about asking you about your childhood, is what I'm saying," I said.

Harry shrugged. "What's sex without a little guilt?"

"What pissed me off was the one where they got me all pissed off," Thomas said. "I swear I was going to clobber that guy. He said the Cubs ought to have been demoted to the minor leagues after they went two centuries without a World Series championship."

"That sounds reasonable to me," Susan said.

"Don't *you* start," Thomas said. "Man. Pow. I'm telling you. You don't mess with the Cubs."

If the first day was all about demeaning feats of intellect, the second day was about demeaning feats of strength, or lack thereof.

"Here's a ball," one proctor said to me. "Bounce it." I did. I was told to move on.

I walked around a small athletic track. I was asked to run a small distance. I did some light calisthenics. I played a video game. I was asked to shoot at a target on a wall with a light gun. I swam (I liked that part. I've always liked swimming, so long as my head's above water). For two hours, I was placed in a rec room with several dozen other

people and told to do whatever I wanted. I shot some pool. I played a game of Ping-Pong. God help me, I played shuffleboard.

At no point did I even break a sweat.

"What the hell sort of army is this, anyway?" I asked the Old Farts at lunch.

"It makes a little bit of sense," Harry said. "Yesterday we did basic intellect and emotion. Today was basic physical movement. Again, they seem interested in the foundations of high order activity."

"I'm not really aware of Ping-Pong being indicative of higher order physical activity," I said.

"Hand-eye coordination," Harry said. "Timing. Precision."

"And you never know when you're going to have to bat back a grenade," Alan piped in.

"Exactly," Harry said. "Also, what do you want them to do? Have us run a marathon? We'd all drop before the end of the first mile."

"Speak for yourself, flabby," Thomas said.

"I stand corrected," Harry said. "Our friend Thomas would make it to mile six before *his* heart imploded. If he didn't get a food-related cramp first."

"Don't be silly," Thomas said. "Everyone knows you need to power up with carbohydrates before a race. Which is why I'm going back for more fettuccine."

"You're not running a marathon, Thomas," Susan said.

"The day is young," Thomas said.

"Actually," Jesse said, "my schedule is empty. I've got nothing planned for the rest of the day. And tomorrow, the only thing on the schedule is 'Concluding Physical Improvements' from 0600 to 1200 and a general recruit assembly at 2000, after dinner."

"My schedule is finished until tomorrow, too," I said. A quick glance up and down the table showed that everyone else was done for the day as well. "Well, then," I said. "What are we going to do to amuse ourselves?"

"There's always more shuffleboard," Susan said.

"I have a better idea," Harry said. "Anyone have plans at 1500?"

We all shook our heads.

"Swell," Harry said. "Then meet me back here. I have a field trip for the Old Farts."

• • •

"Are we even supposed to be here?" Jesse asked.

"Sure," said Harry. "Why not? And even if we're not, what are they going to do? We're not really in the military yet. We can't officially be court-martialed."

"No, but they can probably blow us out an air lock," Jesse said.

"Don't be silly," Harry said. "That would be a waste of perfectly good air."

Harry had led us to an observation deck in the Colonial area of the ship. And indeed, while we recruits had never been specifically told we couldn't go to the Colonial's decks, neither had we been told that we could (or should). Standing as we were in the deserted deck, the seven of us stood out like truant schoolkids at a peep show.

Which, in one sense, was what we were. "During our little exercises today, I struck up a conversation with one of the Colonial folks," Harry said, "and he mentioned that the *Henry Hudson* was going to make its skip today at 1535. And I figure that none of us has actually seen what a skip looks like, so I asked him where one would go to get a good view. And he mentioned here. So here we are, and with"—Harry glanced at his PDA—"four minutes to spare."

"Sorry about that," Thomas said. "I didn't mean to hold everyone up. The fettuccine was excellent, but my lower intestine would apparently beg to differ."

"Please feel free not to share such information in the future, Thomas," Susan said. "We don't know you that well yet."

"Well, how else will you *get* to know me that well?" Thomas said. No one bothered to answer that one.

"Anyone know where we are right now? In space, that is," I asked after a few moments of silence had passed.

"We're still in the solar system," Alan said, and pointed out the window. "You can tell because you can still see the constellations. See, look, there's Orion. If we'd traveled any significant distance, the stars

would have shifted their relative position in the sky. Constellations would have been stretched out or would be entirely unrecognizable."

"Where are we supposed to be skipping to?" Jesse asked.

"The Phoenix system," Alan said. "But that won't tell you anything, because 'Phoenix' is the name of the planet, not of the star. There is a constellation named 'Phoenix,' and in fact, there it is"—he pointed to a collection of stars—"but the planet Phoenix isn't around any of the stars in that constellation. If I remember correctly, it's actually in the constellation Lupus, which is farther north"—he pointed to another, dimmer collection of stars—"but we can't actually see the star from here."

"You sure know your constellations," Jesse said admiringly.

"Thanks," Alan said. "I wanted to be an astronomer when I was younger, but astronomers get paid for shit. So I became a theoretical physicist instead."

"Lots of money in thinking up new subatomic particles?" Thomas asked.

"Well, no," Alan admitted. "But I developed a theory that helped the company I worked for create a new energy containment system for naval vessels. The company's profit-sharing incentive plan gave me one percent for that. Which came to more money than I could spend, and trust me, I made the effort."

"Must be nice to be rich," Susan said.

"It wasn't too bad," Alan admitted. "Of course, I'm not rich anymore. You give it up when you join. And you lose other things, too. I mean, in about a minute, all that time I spent memorizing the constellations will be wasted effort. There's no Orion or Ursa Minor or Cassiopeia where we're going. This might sound stupid, but it's entirely possible I'll miss the constellations more than I miss the money. You can always make more money. But we're not coming back here. It's the last time I'll see these old friends."

Susan went over and put an arm around Alan's shoulder. Harry looked down at his PDA. "Here we go," he said, and began a countdown. When he got to "one," we all looked up and out the window.

It wasn't dramatic. One second we were looking at one star-filled sky. The next, we were looking at another. If you blinked, you would have missed it. And yet, you could tell it was an entirely alien sky. We all may not have had Alan's knowledge of the constellations, but most of us know how to pick out Orion and the Big Dipper from the stellar lineup. They were nowhere to be found, an absence subtle and yet substantial. I glanced over at Alan. He was standing like a pillar, hand in Susan's.

"We're turning," Thomas said. We watched as the stars slid counterclockwise as the *Henry Hudson* changed course. Suddenly the enormous blue arm of the planet Phoenix hovered above us. And above it (or below it, from our orientation) was a space station so large, so massive, and so *busy* that all we could do was bulge our eyes at it.

Finally someone spoke. And to everyone's surprise, it was Maggie. "Would you look at that," she said.

We all turned to look at her. She was visibly annoyed. "I'm not *mute,*" she said. "I just don't talk much. *This* deserves comment of some kind."

"No kidding," Thomas said, turning back to look at it. "It makes Colonial Station look like a pile of puke."

"How many ships do you see?" Jesse said to me.

"I don't know," I said. "Dozens. There could be hundreds, for all I know. I didn't even know this many starships *existed.*"

"If any of us were still thinking Earth was the center of the human universe," Harry said, "now would be an excellent time to revise that theory," Harry said.

We all stood and looked at the new world out the window.

• • •

My PDA chimed me awake at 0545, which was notable in that I had set it to wake me at 0600. The screen was flashing; there was a message labeled URGENT on it. I tapped the message.

NOTICE:

From 0600 to 1200, we will be conducting the final physical improvement regimen for all recruits. To ensure prompt processing, all

recruits are required to remain in their staterooms until such time as Colonial officials arrive to escort them to their physical improvement sessions. To aid in the smooth function of this process, stateroom doors will be secured as of 0600. Please take this time to take care of any personal business that requires use of the rest rooms or other areas outside your stateroom. If after 0600 you need to use the rest-room facilities, contact the Colonial staffer on your stateroom deck through your PDA.

You will be notified fifteen minutes prior to your appointment; please be dressed and prepared when Colonial officials arrive at your door. Breakfast will not be served; lunch and dinner will be served at the usual time.

At my age, you don't have to tell me twice to pee; I padded down to the rest room to take care of business and hoped that my appointment was sooner rather than later, as I didn't want to have to get permission to relieve myself.

My appointment was neither sooner nor later; at 0900 my PDA alerted me, and at 0915 there was a sharp rap at my door and a man's voice calling my name. I opened the door to find two Colonials on the other side. I received permission from them to make a quick rest-room stop, and then followed them from my deck, back to the waiting room of Dr. Russell. I waited briefly before I was allowed entrance into his examination room.

"Mr. Perry, good to see you again," he said, extending his hand. The Colonials who accompanied me left through the far door. "Please step up to the crèche."

"The last time I did, you jackhammered several thousand bits of metal into my head," I said. "Forgive me if I'm not entirely enthusiastic about climbing in again."

"I understand," Dr. Russell said. "However, today is going to be pain-free. And we are under something of a time constraint, so, if you please." He motioned to the crèche.

I reluctantly stepped in. "If I feel so much as a twinge, I'm going to hit you," I warned.

"Fair enough," Dr. Russell said as he closed the crèche door. I noted that unlike the last time, Dr. Russell bolted down the door to the crèche; maybe he was taking the threat seriously. I didn't mind. "Tell me, Mr. Perry," he said as he bolted the door, "what do you think of the last couple of days?"

"They were confusing and irritating," I said. "If I knew I was going to be treated like a preschooler, I probably wouldn't have signed up."

"That's pretty much what everyone says," Dr. Russell said. "So let me explain a little bit about what we've been trying to do. We put in the sensor array for two reasons. First, as you may have guessed, we're monitoring your brain activity while you perform various basic functions and experience certain primal emotions. Every human's brain processes information and experience in more or less the same way, but at the same time each person uses certain pathways and processes unique to them. It's a little like how every human hand has five fingers, but each human being has his own set of fingerprints. What we've been trying to do is isolate your mental 'fingerprint.' Make sense?"

I nodded.

"Good. So now you know why we had you doing ridiculous and stupid things for two days."

"Like talking to a naked woman about my seventh birthday party," I said.

"We get a lot of really useful information from that one," Dr. Russell said.

"I don't see how," I said.

"It's technical," Dr. Russell assured me. "In any event, the last couple days give us a good idea of how your brain uses neural pathways and processes all sorts of stimuli, and that's information we can use as a template."

Before I could ask, *A template for what,* Dr. Russell continued. "Second, the sensor array does more than record what your brain is doing. It can also transmit a real-time representation of the activity in your brain. Or to put it another way, it can broadcast your consciousness. This is important, because unlike specific mental processes, consciousness can't be recorded. It has to be live if it's going to make the transfer."

"The transfer," I said.

"That's right," Dr. Russell said.

"Do you mind if I ask you what the hell you're talking about?" I said.

Dr. Russell smiled. "Mr. Perry, when you signed up to join the army, you thought we'd make you young again, right?"

"Yes," I said. "Everybody does. You can't fight a war with old people, yet you recruit them. You have to have some way to make them young again."

"How do you think we do it?" Dr. Russell asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Gene therapy. Cloned replacement parts. You'd swap out old parts somehow and put in new ones."

"You're half right," Dr. Russell said. "We do use gene therapy and cloned replacements. But we don't 'swap out' anything, except *you.*"

"I don't understand," I said. I felt very cold, like reality was being tugged out from under my feet.

"Your body is *old,* Mr. Perry. It's old and it won't work for much longer. There's no point in trying to save it or upgrade it. It's not something that gains value when it ages or has replaceable parts that keep it running like new. All a human body does when it gets older is get old. So we're going to get rid of it. We're getting rid of it all. The only part of you that we're going to save is the only part of you that *hasn't* decayed—your mind, your consciousness, your sense of self."

Dr. Russell walked over to the far door, where the Colonials had exited, and rapped on it. Then he turned back to me. "Take a good look at your body, Mr. Perry," he said. "Because you're about to say goodbye to it. You're going somewhere else."

"Where am I going, Dr. Russell?" I asked. I could barely make enough spit to talk.

"You're going here," he said, and opened the door.

From the other side, the Colonials came back in. One of them was pushing a wheelchair with someone in it. I craned my head to take a look. And I began to shake.

It was me.

Fifty years ago.

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FIVE

"Now, I want you to relax," Dr. Russell said to me.

The Colonials had wheeled the younger me to the other crèche and were in the process of placing the body into it. It or he or I or whatever offered no resistance; they might as well have been moving someone in a coma. Or a corpse. I was fascinated. And horrified. A small little voice in my brain told me it was good I had gone to the bathroom before I came in, or otherwise I'd be peeing down my leg.

"How—" I began, and I choked. My mouth was too dry to talk. Dr. Russell spoke to one of the Colonials, who left and returned with a small cup of water. Dr. Russell held the cup as he gave the water to me, which was good, because I don't think I could have managed to grip it. He spoke to me as I drank.

"'How' is usually attached to one of two questions," he said. "The first is, How did you make a younger version of me? The answer to that is that ten years ago we took a genetic sample and used that to make your new body." He took the cup away.

"A clone," I said, finally.

"No," Dr. Russell said. "Not exactly. The DNA has been heavily modified. You can see the most obvious difference—your new body's skin."

I looked back over and realized that in the shock of seeing a younger version of me, I missed a rather obvious and glaring difference.

"He's *green,*" I said.

"*You're* green, you mean," Dr. Russell said. "Or will be in about five minutes. So that's one 'how' question. The second one is, How do you get me into there?" He pointed to my green-skinned doppelganger. "And the answer to that is, we're transferring your consciousness."

"How?" I asked.

"We take the representation of brain activity that's tracked by your sensor array and send it—and you—over there," Dr. Russell said. "We've taken the brain pattern information we've collected over the last couple of days and used it to prepare your new brain for your consciousness, so when we send you over, things will look familiar. I'm giving you the simplified version of things, obviously; it's vastly more complicated. But it'll do for right now. Now, let's get you plugged in."

Dr. Russell reached up and began to maneuver the crèche's arm over my head. I started to move my head away, so he stopped. "We're not putting anything in this time, Mr. Perry," he said. "The injector cap has been replaced with a signal amplifier. There's nothing to worry about."

"Sorry," I said, and moved my head back into position.

"Don't be," Dr. Russell said, and fit the cap over my skull. "You're taking this better than most recruits. The guy before you screamed like a pig and fainted. We had to transfer him over unconscious. He's going to wake up young and green and very, very disturbed. Trust me, you're a doll."

I smiled, and glanced over to the body that would soon be me. "Where's his cap?" I asked.

"Doesn't need one," Dr. Russell said, and began tapping his PDA. "Like I said, this body's been heavily modified."

"That sounds ominous," I said.

"You'll feel differently once you're inside." Dr. Russell finished playing with his PDA and turned back to me. "Okay, we're ready. Let me tell you what's going to happen next."

"Please," I said.

He turned the PDA around. "When I press this button"—he indicated a button on the screen—"your sensor array will begin transmitting your brain activity into the amplifier. Once your brain activity is sufficiently mapped, I'll connect this crèche to a specialized computer bank. At the same time, a similar connection will be opened

to your new brain over there. When the connections check out, we'll broadcast your consciousness into your new brain. When the brain activity takes hold in your new brain, we'll sever the connection, and there you are, in your new brain and body. Any questions?"

"Does this procedure ever fail?" I asked.

"You *would* ask that question," Dr. Russell said. "The answer is yes. On rare occasions something can go wrong. However, it's extremely rare. I've been doing this for twenty years—thousands of transfers—and I've lost someone only once. The woman had a massive stroke during the transfer process. Her brain patterns became chaotic and consciousness didn't transfer. Everyone else made it through fine."

"So as long as I don't actually die, I'll live," I said.

"An interesting way to put it. But yes, that's about right."

"How do you know when consciousness has transferred?"

"We'll know it through here"—Dr. Russell tapped the side of his PDA—"and we'll know it because you'll tell us. Trust me, you'll know when you've made the transfer."

"How do *you* know?" I asked. "Have you ever done this? Been transferred?"

Dr. Russell smiled. "Actually, yes," he said. "Twice, in fact."

"But you're not green," I said.

"That's the second transfer. You don't have to stay green forever," he said, almost wistfully. Then he blinked and looked at his PDA again. "I'm afraid we have to cut the questions short now, Mr. Perry, since I have several more recruits to transfer after you. Are you ready to begin?"

"Hell no, I'm not ready," I said. "I'm so scared my bowels are about to cut out."

"Then let me rephrase," Dr. Russell said. "Are you ready to get it over with?"

"God, yes," I said.

"Then let's get to it," Dr. Russell said, and tapped the screen of his PDA.

The crèche gave a slight *thunk* as something physically switched on inside it. I glanced over to Dr. Russell. "The amplifier," he said. "This part will take about a minute."

I grunted acknowledgment and looked over to my new me. It was cradled in the crèche, motionless, like a wax figurine that someone had spilled green coloring into during the casting process. It looked like I did so long ago—better than I did, actually. I wasn't the most athletic young adult on the block. This version of me looked like he was muscled like a competitive swimmer. And it had a *great* head of hair.

I couldn't even *imagine* being in that body.

"We're at full resolution," Dr. Russell said. "Opening connection." He tapped his PDA.

There was a slight jolt, and then it suddenly felt like there was a big, echoey room in my brain. "Whoa," I said.

"Echo chamber?" Dr. Russell asked. I nodded. "That's the computer bank," he said. "Your consciousness is perceiving the small time lag between there and here. It's nothing to worry about. Okay, opening connection between the new body and the computer bank." Another PDA tap.

From across the room, the new me opened his eyes.

"I did that," Dr. Russell said.

"He's got cat's eyes," I said.

"*You've* got cat's eyes," Dr. Russell said. "Both connections are clear and noise-free. I'm going to start the transfer now. You're going to feel a little disoriented." A PDA tap—

—and I fell

waaaaaaaaaaaaay down

(and felt like I was being pressed hard through a fine mesh mattress)

and all the memories I ever had hit me in the face like a runaway brick wall

one clear flash of standing at the altar
watching kathy walk down the aisle
seeing her foot catch the front of her gown
a small stutter in her step
then she corrected beautifully
smiled up at me as if to say
yeah like ***that's*** *going to stop me*

*another flash of kathy *where the hell did i put the vanilla* and then the clatter of the mixing bowl hitting kitchen tile*

(god damn it kathy)

And then I'm *me* again, staring into Dr. Russell's room feeling dizzy and looking straight at Dr. Russell's face and also the back of his head and thinking to myself, *Damn, that's a neat trick,* and it seems like I just had that thought in stereo.

And it hits me. I'm in two places at the same time.

I smile and see the old me and the new me smile simultaneously.

"I'm breaking the laws of physics," I say to Dr. Russell from two mouths.

And he says, "You're in."

And then he taps that goddamned PDA of his.

And there's just one of me again.

The *other* me. I can tell because I'm no longer staring at the new me anymore, I'm looking at the old me.

And it stares at me like it knows something truly strange has just happened.

And then the stare seems to say, *I'm no longer needed.*

And then it closes its eyes.

"Mr. Perry," Dr. Russell said, and then repeated it, and then lightly slapped me on the cheek.

"Yes," I said. "I'm here. Sorry."

"What's your full name, Mr. Perry?"

I thought about it for a second. Then, "John Nicholas Perry."

"What's your birthday?"

"June tenth."

"What was the name of your second-grade teacher?"

I looked directly at Dr. Russell. "Christ, man. I couldn't even remember that when I was in my *old* body."

Dr. Russell smiled. "Welcome to your new life, Mr. Perry. You made it through with flying colors." He unlatched the door to the crèche and opened it wide. "Come out of there, please."

I placed my hands—my green hands—on the side of the crèche and pushed outward. I placed my right foot forward and staggered a little bit. Dr. Russell came up beside me and steadied me. "Careful," he said. "You've been an older man for a while. It's going to take you a little bit of time to remember how to be in a young body."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Well," he said. "For one thing, you can straighten up."

He was right. I was stooped slightly (kids, drink your milk). I straightened up, and took another step forward. And another. Good news, I remembered how to walk. I cracked a grin like a schoolboy as I paced in the room.

"How do you feel?" Dr. Russell asked.

"I feel *young,*" I said, only a little joyously.

"You should," Dr. Russell said. "This body has a biological age of twenty. It's actually younger than that, but we can grow them fast these days."

I jumped experimentally and felt like I bounced halfway back to Earth. "I'm not even old enough to drink anymore," I said.

"You're still seventy-five inside," Dr. Russell said.

At that I stopped my little jumping and walked over to my old body, resting in the crèche. It looked sad and sagged, like an old suitcase. I reached out to touch my old face. It was warm, and I felt breath. I recoiled.

"It's still *alive,*" I said, backing away.

"It's brain dead," Dr. Russell said quickly. "All your cognitive functions made the transfer. Once they had, I shut down this brain. It's running on autopilot—breathing and pumping blood, but nothing more and that only provisionally. Left on its own, it'll be dead within a few days."

I crept back to my old body. "What's going to happen to it?" I asked.

"We'll store it in the short term," Dr. Russell said. "Mr. Perry, I hate to rush you, but it's time for you to return to your quarters so I can continue my work with other recruits. We have quite a few to get through before noon."

"I have some questions about this body," I said.

"We have a brochure," Dr. Russell said. "I'll have it downloaded into your PDA."

"Gee, thanks," I said.

"Not at all," Dr. Perry said, and nodded toward the Colonials. "These men will escort you back to your quarters. Congratulations again."

I walked over to the Colonials, and we turned to go. Then I stopped. "Wait," I said. "I forgot something." I walked over to my old body again, still in the crèche. I looked over to Dr. Russell and pointed to the door. "I need to unlock this," I said. Dr. Russell nodded. I unlocked it, opened it, and took my old body's left hand. On the ring finger was a simple gold band. I slipped it off and slipped it on my ring finger. Then I cupped my old face with my new hands.

"Thank you," I said to me. "Thank you for everything."

Then I went out with the Colonials.

THE NEW YOU

An introduction to your new body,
for recruits of the Colonial Defense Forces
From the staff of Colonial Genetics
Two centuries of building better bodies!

[This was the splash page of the brochure waiting for me on my PDA. You'll just have to imagine the illustration, which echoed the famous da Vinci study of the human body, only with a nude green man where the other dude used to be. But let's continue.]

By now, you have received your new body from the Colonial Defense Forces. Congratulations! Your new body is the end result of decades of refinement by the scientists and engineers at Colonial Genetics, and is optimized for the rigorous demands of CDF service. This document will serve to give a brief introduction on the important features and functions of your new body, and provide answers to some of the most common questions recruits have about their new body.

NOT JUST A NEW BODY—A *BETTER* BODY

You've surely noticed the green skin tone of your new body. This isn't merely cosmetic. Your new skin (KloraDerm™) incorporates chlorophyll to provide your body with an extra source of energy and to optimize your body's use of both oxygen and carbon dioxide. The result: You'll feel fresher, longer—and better able to perform your duties as a CDF serviceperson! This is only the beginning of the improvements you'll find in your body. Here are some others:

- Your blood tissue has been replaced by SmartBlood™—a revolutionary system that increases oxygen-carrying capacity fourfold while it guards your body against disease, toxins, and death from blood tissue loss!
- Our patented CatsEye™ technology gives you sight you have to see to believe! Increased rod and cone counts give you better imaging resolution than can be achieved in most naturally evolved systems, while specially designed light amplifiers allow you to see clearly in extreme low-light situations.
- Our UncommonSense™ suite of sense enhancements allows you to touch, smell, hear and taste like you never have before, as our expanded nerve placement and optimized connections expand your perceptual ranges in all sense categories. You'll feel the difference from the first day!
- How strong do you want to be? With HardArm™ technologies that boost natural muscle strength and reaction time, you'll be stronger and faster than you ever dreamed possible—so strong and fast, in fact, that by law Colonial Genetics can't sell this technology on the consumer market. That's a real "leg up" for you recruits!
- Never be unconnected again! You'll never lose your BrainPal™ computer because it resides in your own brain. Our proprietary Assistive Adaptive Interface works *with* you so you can access your BrainPal™ your way. Your BrainPal™ also serves to coordinate nonorganic technologies in your new body, such as SmartBlood™. CDF servicepeople swear by this amazing piece of technology—and so will you.

BUILDING A BETTER YOU

You'll no doubt be amazed at how much your new body can do. But have you wondered how it was designed? You may be interested to know that your body is just the latest series in a line of advanced, improved bodies designed by Colonial Genetics. Through proprietary technology, we adapt both genetic information from other species and the latest in miniaturized robotic technologies to improve your new body. It's hard work, but you'll be glad we made the effort!

From our first improvements nearly two centuries ago, we've progressively built on our work. To introduce changes and improvements, we rely first on advanced computer modeling techniques to simulate the effects of each proposed improvement on the entire body system. The improvements that make it through this process are then tested on biological models. Then and only then are improvements incorporated into the final body design, integrated with the "starter" DNA you provide. Rest assured that each body improvement is safe and tested, and designed to make a better you!

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR NEW BODY

1. *Does My New Body Have a Brand Name?*

Yes! Your new body is known as the Defender Series XII, "Hercules" model. Technically, it's known as CG/CDF Model 12, Revision 1.2.11. This body model is for use only by the Colonial Defense Forces. Additionally, each body has its own model number for maintenance purposes. You can access your own number through your BrainPal™. Don't worry, you can still use your given name for everyday purposes!

2. *Does My New Body Age?*

The Defender Series body is designed to provide the CDF with optimum performance its entire operating life. To do this, advanced regenerative techniques are employed at the genetic level to reduce natural entropic tendencies. With a basic maintenance regimen, your new body will remain in top condition as long as you operate it. You'll

also find that injuries and disabilities are corrected quickly—so you can be up and running again in no time flat!

3. *Can I Pass These Amazing Improvements to My Children?*
No. Your body and its biological and technological systems are patented by Colonial Genetics and may not be passed on without permission. Also, due to the extensive nature of Defender Series improvements, its DNA is no longer genetically compatible with unmodified humans, and lab tests indicate that Defender Series mating creates incompatibilities lethal to the embryo in every case. Additionally, the CDF has determined that the ability to transmit genetic information is nonessential to its servicepeople's mission; therefore, each Defender model ships sterile, although other related functionality remains intact.

4. *I'm Worried About the Theological Implications of This New Body. What Should I Do?*
While neither Colonial Genetics nor the CDF maintains an official position on the theological or psychological ramifications of the transfer of consciousness from one body to another, we understand that many recruits may have questions or concerns. Each recruit transport comes equipped with clergy representing most of Earth's major religions and an additional complement of psychological therapists. We encourage you to seek them out and discuss your questions with them.

5. *How Long Will I Stay in My New Body?*
Defender Series bodies are designed for CDF use; so long as you stay in the CDF, you will be able to use and enjoy the technological and biological advancements of this new body. When you leave the CDF, you will be provided with a new, unaltered human body based on your own original DNA.

From all of us here at Colonial Genetics, congratulations on your new body! We know it will serve you well through your service in the

Colonial Defense Forces. Thanks for your service to the colonies—and enjoy…Your New Body.

I set the PDA down, went over to the stateroom sink, and looked into the mirror at my new face.

It was impossible to ignore the eyes. My old body had brown eyes—muddy brown, but with interesting flecks of gold. Kathy used to tell me that she had read that flecks of color in the iris were nothing more than additional fatty tissue. So I had fat eyes.

If those eyes were fat, these were positively obese. They were gold from the pupil outward toward the rim, where they shaded toward green. The rim of the iris was a deep emerald; spikes of that color stabbed toward the pupils. The pupils themselves were slitted, drawn tight by the light directly above the mirror. I turned off that light and then turned the primary light off as well; the only light in the room was a small LED on the PDA. My old eyes would have never been able to see off of that.

My new eyes took only a moment to adjust. The room was undeniably dim, but I could make out every object clearly. I went back to the mirror and looked in; my eyes were dilated like someone with a belladonna overdose. I flicked the sink light back on and watched my pupils constrict with impressive speed.

I took off my clothes and took the first real look at my new body. My earlier impression of my form turned out to be correct; for lack of a better term, I was totally buffed out. I ran my hand down my chest and washboard stomach. I had never been this athletically fit in my life. I had no idea how they managed to make the new me this fit. I wondered how long it would take me to get it into the flabby shape I had been in during my real twenties. Then I wondered, given the amount of fiddling they had done with this body's DNA, if it was even possible for it to become flabby. I hoped not. I liked the new me.

Oh, and I was entirely hairless from the eyelashes down.

I mean, *hairless*—not a spare hair anywhere. Arms bare, legs bare, back bare (not that it had never *not* been bare before, ahem), private bits bare. I rubbed my chin to feel if there was a hint of stubble there.

Smooth as a baby's bottom. Or my bottom, now. I looked down at my package; to be honest, without hair, it looked a little forlorn. The hair on my head was full but nondescript brown. That much hadn't changed from my previous incarnation.

I held my hand in front of my face to get a look at the skin tone. It was a shade of green that was light but not glaring, which was good; I don't think I could have handled being chartreuse. My skin was an even tone across my body, although my nipples and the tip of my penis were slightly darker. Basically, I seemed to have the same color contrast as before, just in a different hue. One thing I did notice, however, my veins were more noticeable, and grayish. I suspect that whatever color SmartBlood™ was (whatever it really was), it wasn't bloodred. I dressed myself again.

My PDA beeped at me. I picked it up. There was a message waiting.

You now have access to your BrainPal™ computer system, it read. Would you like to activate it at this time? There were buttons on the screen for YES and NO. I picked YES.

Suddenly, a deep, rich, soothing voice out of nowhere. I nearly jumped out of my new green skin.

"Hello!" it said. "You are interfacing with your BrainPal internal computer, with the patented Assistive Adaptive Interface! Do not be alarmed! Thanks to the BrainPal integration, the voice you are now hearing is being generated directly to the hearing centers of your brain."

Great, I thought. *There's another voice in my head now.*

"After this brief introductory session, you may turn off the voice at any time. We'll begin with some options you can choose by answering 'yes' or 'no.' At this point, your BrainPal would like you to say 'yes' and 'no' when directed, so that it may learn to recognize this response. So when you are ready, please say the word 'yes.' You may say it at any time."

The voice stopped. I hesitated, a little bit dazed.

"Please say 'yes' now," the voice repeated.

"Yes!" I said, a little jumpy.

"Thank you for saying 'yes.' Now, please say 'no.'"

“No,” I said, and for a moment wondered if the BrainPal™ would think I was saying “no” to its request, get huffy and fry my brain in its own juices.

“Thank you for saying ‘no,’” the voice said, revealing itself to be something of a literalist. “As we progress together, you will learn in time that you will not need to verbalize these commands in order for your BrainPal to respond to them. However, in the short term, you will probably wish to verbalize while you become comfortable communicating with your BrainPal. At this time, you have the option of continuing with audio, or switching to a text interface. Would you prefer to switch now to a text interface?”

“God, yes,” I said.

We will now proceed with a text interface, a line of text read, floating directly in my line of sight. The text was perfectly contrasted against what I was staring at. I moved my head, and the text stayed dead center, the contrast changed to stay perfectly readable at all times. Wild.

It is recommended that during your initial text session, you remain seated to avoid injuring yourself, the BrainPal wrote. Please sit now. I sat.

During your initial sessions with your BrainPal™, you will find it easier to communicate by verbalizing. To aid the BrainPal™ in understanding your questions, we will now teach your BrainPal™ to understand your voice as it speaks. Please speak the following phonemes as you read them. In my field of vision, a list of phonemes unspooled. I read them right to left. The BrainPal then had me speak a number of short sentences. I did.

Thank you, the BrainPal wrote. Your BrainPal™ will now be able to take direction from the sound of your voice. Would you like to personalize your BrainPal™ now?

“Yes,” I said.

Many BrainPal™ users find it useful to give their BrainPal™ a name other than BrainPal™. Would you like to name your BrainPal™ at this time?

“Yes,” I said.

Please speak the name you would like to give your BrainPal™.

"'Asshole,'" I said.

You have selected "Asshole," the BrainPal wrote, and to its credit it spelled the word correctly. Be aware that many recruits have selected this name for their BrainPal™. Would you like to choose a different name?

"No," I said, and was proud that so many of my fellow recruits also felt this way about their BrainPal.

Your BrainPal™ is now Asshole, the BrainPal wrote. You may change this name in the future if you like. Now you must choose an access phrase to activate Asshole. While Asshole is active at all times it will only respond to commands after it has been activated. Please choose a short phrase. Asshole suggests "Activate Asshole" but you may choose another phrase. Please say your activation phrase now.

"'Hey, Asshole,'" I said.

You have chosen "Hey, Asshole." Please say it again to confirm. I did. Then it asked me to choose a deactivation phrase. I chose (of course) "Go away, Asshole."

Would you like Asshole to refer to itself in the first person?

"Absolutely," I said.

I am Asshole.

"Of course you are."

I await your commands or queries.

"Are you intelligent?" I asked.

I am equipped with a natural language processor and other systems to understand questions and comments and to provide answers, which often gives the appearance of intelligence, especially when connected to larger computer networks. Brain Pal™ systems, however, are not natively intelligent. For example, this is an automated response. This question is asked frequently.

"How do you understand me?"

At this stage I am responding to your voice, Asshole wrote. As you speak I am monitoring your brain and learning how your brain activates when you desire to communicate with me. In time I will be

able to understand you without the need for you to speak. And in time, you may also learn to use me without conscious audible or visual cues.

"What do you do?" I asked.

I have a range of abilities. Would you like to see a formatted list?

"Please," I said.

A massive list appeared before my eyes. To see a list of subcategories, please select a top category and say, "Expand [category]." To perform an action, please say, "Open [category]."

I read down the list. Apparently, there was very little Asshole couldn't do. He could send messages to other recruits. He could download reports. He could play music or video. He could play games. He could call up any document on a system. He could store incredible amounts of data. He could perform complex calculations. He could diagnose physical ailments and provide suggestions for cures. He could create a local network among a chosen group of other BrainPal users. He could provide instantaneous translations of hundreds of human and alien languages. He could even provide field of vision information on any other BrainPal user. I turned this option on. I barely recognized myself anymore; I doubt I'd recognize any of the other Old Farts. Overall, Asshole was a pretty useful thing to have sitting inside one's brain.

I heard an unlatching sound at my door. I looked up. "Hey, Asshole," I said. "What time is it?"

It is now 1200, Asshole wrote. I had spent the better part of ninety minutes fiddling with him. Well, enough of that; I was ready to see some real people.

"Go away, Asshole," I said.

Good-bye, Asshole wrote. The text disappeared as soon as I read it.

There was a knock on the door. I walked over to open it. I figured it was Harry; I wondered what he looked like.

He looked like a knockout brunette with dark (green) olive skin and legs that went all the way up.

"You're not Harry," I said, incredibly stupidly.

The brunette looked at me and looked me up and down. "John?" she finally said.

I stared blankly for a second, and the name hit me—just before the ID floated ghostlike before my eyes. "Jesse," I said.

She nodded. I stared. I opened my mouth to say something. She grabbed my head and kissed me so hard that I was knocked back into my quarters. She managed to kick the door shut on our way down to the floor. I was impressed.

I had forgotten just how easy it was for a young man to get an erection.

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SIX

I'd forgotten how many times a young man can *get* an erection, too.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Jesse said, lying on top of me after the third (!) time. "But I'm really not all that attracted to you."

"Thank God," I said. "If you were, I'd be worn down to a nub by now."

"Don't get me wrong," Jesse said. "I'm fond of you. Even before the"—she motioned with her hand here, trying to think of a way to describe a rejuvenating, full-body transplant—"the *change,* you were intelligent and kind and funny. A good friend."

"Uh-huh," I said. "You know, Jesse, usually the 'let's be friends' speech is to *prevent* sex."

"I just don't want you to have illusions about what this is about."

"I was under the impression that it was about magically being transported into a body of a twenty-year-old and being so excited about it that it was imperative to have wild sex with the very first person we saw."

Jesse stared at me for a second, then burst out laughing. "Yes! That's exactly it. Although in my case, it was the second person. I have a roommate, you know."

"Yeah? How does Maggie clean up?"

"Oh my God," Jesse said. "She makes me look like a beached whale, John."

I ran my hands over her sides. “That’s a mighty fine beached whale, Jesse.”

“I know!” Jesse said, and suddenly sat up, straddling me. She raised her arms up and crossed them behind her head, perking up her already marvelously firm and full breasts. I felt her inner thighs radiating heat as they wrapped around my midsection. I knew that even though I didn’t have an erection at that very moment, one was coming right up. “I mean, look at me,” she said, unnecessarily, because I hadn’t taken my eyes off her from the moment she sat up. “I look *fabulous.* I don’t say that to be vain. It’s just I never looked this good in real life. Not even *close.*”

“I find that hard to believe,” I said.

She grabbed her breasts and pointed the nipples at my face. “See these?” she said, and wiggled the left one. “In real life, *this* one was a cup size smaller than *this* one, and it was still too large. I had a permanent backache from puberty onward. And I think they were this firm for one week when I was thirteen. *Maybe.*”

She reached down, grabbed my hands, and placed them on her perfect, flat belly. “I never had one of *these,* either,” she said. “I always carried a little pouch down here, even before I had babies. After two kids, well, let’s just say that if I had ever wanted a third, it would have had a duplex in there.”

I slid my hands behind her and grabbed her ass. “What about this?” I said.

“Wide load,” Jesse said, and laughed. “I was a big girl, my friend.”

“Being big’s not a crime,” I said. “Kathy was on the larger side. I liked it just fine.”

“I didn’t have a problem with it at the time,” she said. “Body issues are foolish. On the other hand, I wouldn’t trade now.” She ran her hands over her body, provocatively. “I’m all *sexy!*” And with that, she did a little giggle and a head flip. I laughed.

Jesse leaned forward and peered into my face. “I’m finding this cat’s-eye thing incredibly fascinating,” she said. “I wonder if they actually used cat DNA to make them. You know, spliced cat DNA with ours. I wouldn’t mind being part cat.”

"I don't think it's really cat DNA," I said. "We're not exhibiting other catlike attributes."

Jesse sat back up. "Like what?" she said.

"Well," I said, and let my hands wander up to her breasts, "for one thing, male cats have barbs on their penis."

"Get out," Jesse said.

"No, it's true," I said. "It's the barbs that stimulate the female to ovulate. Look it up. Anyway, no barbs down there. I think you'd've noticed if there were."

"That doesn't prove anything," Jesse said, and suddenly sent her back part back, and her forward part forward, to lie directly on top of me. She grinned salaciously. "It could be that we just haven't been doing it hard enough to make them pop out."

"I'm sensing a challenge," I said.

"I'm sensing something, too," she said, and wiggled.

"What are you thinking about?" Jesse asked me, later.

"I'm thinking about Kathy," I said, "and how often we'd lie around like we're doing now."

"You mean, on the carpet," Jesse said, smiling.

I bopped her gently on the head. "Not that part. Just lying around after sex, talking and enjoying each other's company. We were doing this the first time we talked about enlisting."

"Why did you bring it up?" Jesse said.

"I didn't," I said. "Kathy did. It was on my sixtieth birthday, and I was depressed about getting older. So she suggested that we sign up when the time came. I was a little surprised. We'd always been antimilitary. We protested the Subcontinential War, you know, when it wasn't exactly popular to do that."

"Lots of people protested that war," Jesse said.

"Yeah, but we *really* protested. Became a little bit of a joke about it in town, actually."

"So how did she rationalize signing up with the Colonial Army?"

"She said she wasn't against war or the military in a general sense, just *that* war and our military. She said that people have the right to

defend themselves and that it was probably a nasty universe out there. And she said that beyond those noble reasons, we'd be young again to boot."

"But you wouldn't be able to enlist together," Jesse said. "Unless you were the same age."

"She was a year younger than me," I said. "And I did mention that to her—I said that if I joined the army, I'd be officially dead, we wouldn't be married anymore and who knows if we'd ever see each other again."

"What did she say?"

"She said these were technicalities. She'd find me again and drag me to the altar like she had before. And she would have, you know. She could be a bear about these things."

Jesse propped herself up on her elbow and looked at me. "I'm sorry she's not here with you, John."

I smiled. "It's all right," I said. "I just miss my wife from time to time, that's all."

"I understand," Jesse said. "I miss my husband, too."

I glanced over to her. "I thought he left you for a younger woman and then got food poisoning."

"He did and he did, and he deserved to vomit his guts out," Jesse said. "I don't miss the *man,* really. But I miss having a *husband*. It's nice to have someone you know you're supposed to be with. It's nice to be married."

"It's nice to be married," I agreed.

Jesse snuggled up to me and draped an arm over my chest. "Of course, *this* is nice, too. It's been a while since I've done this."

"Lie on a floor?"

It was her turn to bop me. "No. Well, yes, actually. But more specifically, lie around after sex. Or have sex, for that matter. You don't want to know how long it's been since I've had it."

"Sure I do."

"Bastard. Eight years."

"No wonder you jumped me the minute you saw me," I said.

"You got that right," Jesse said. "You happened to be very conveniently located."

"Location is everything, that's what my mother always told me."

"You had a strange mother," Jesse said. "Yo, bitch, what time is it?"

"What?" I said.

"I'm talking to the voice in my head," she said.

"Nice name you have for it," I said.

"What did you name yours?"

"Asshole."

Jesse nodded. "Sounds about right. Well, the bitch tells me it's just after 1600. We have two hours until dinner. You know what that means?"

"I don't know. I think four times is my limit, even when I'm young and superimproved."

"Calm yourself. It means we have just enough time for a nap."

"Should I grab a blanket?"

"Don't be silly. Just because I had sex on the carpet doesn't mean I want to sleep on it. You've got an extra bunk. I'm going to use it."

"So I'm going to have to nap alone?"

"I'll make it up to you," Jesse said. "Remind me when I wake up."

I did. She did.

"God *damn* it," Thomas said as he sat down at the table, carrying a tray so piled with food that it was a miracle he could even lift it. "Aren't we all just too good-looking for words."

He was right. The Old Farts had cleaned up amazingly well. Thomas and Harry and Alan could all have been male models; of the four of us, I was definitely the ugly duckling, and I looked—well, I looked *good*. As for the women, Jesse was stunning, Susan was even more so, and Maggie frankly looked like a goddess. It actually hurt to look at her.

It hurt to look at all of us. In that good, dizzying sort of way. We all spent a few minutes just staring at each other. And it wasn't just us. As I scanned through the room, I couldn't find a single ugly human in it. It was pleasingly disturbing.

"It's impossible," Harry said, suddenly, to me. I looked over at him. "I looked around, too," he said. "There's no way in hell all the people

in this room all looked as good as they do now when they were originally this age."

"Speak for yourself, Harry," Thomas said. "If anything, I do believe I am a shade less attractive than in my salad days."

"You're the same color as a salad these days," Harry said. "And even if we excuse Doubtful Thomas over here—"

"I'm going to cry all the way to a mirror," Thomas said.

"—it's well nigh impossible that everyone is in the same basket. I guarantee you I did not look this good when I was twenty. I was fat. I had massive acne. I was already balding."

"Stop it," Susan said. "I'm getting aroused."

"And I'm trying to eat," said Thomas.

"I can laugh about it now, because I look like *this,*" Harry said, running his hand down his body, as if to present this year's model. "But the new me has very little to do with the old me, I'll tell you that."

"You sound as if it bothers you," Alan said.

"It does, a little," Harry admitted. "I mean, I'll *take* it. But when someone gives me a gift horse, I look it in the mouth. Why are we so good-looking?"

"Good genes," Alan said.

"Sure," Harry said. "But whose? Ours? Or something that they spliced out of a lab somewhere?"

"We're just all in excellent shape now," Jesse said. "I was telling John that this body is in far better shape than my real one ever was."

Maggie suddenly spoke up. "I say that, too," she said. "I say 'my real body' when I mean 'my old body.' It's as if this body isn't real to me yet."

"It's real enough, sister," Susan said. "You still have to pee with it. I know."

"This from the woman who criticized *me* for oversharing," Thomas said.

"My point, because I did have one," Jesse said, "is that while they were toning up our bodies, they took some time to tone up the rest of us as well."

"Agreed," Harry said. "But that's not telling us *why* they did it."

"It's so we bond," Maggie said.

Everyone stared. “Well, look who’s coming out of her shell.”

“Bite me, Susan.” Maggie said. Susan grinned. “Look, it’s basic human psychology that we’re inclined to like people who we find attractive. Moreover, everyone in this room, even us, are basically strangers to each other, and have few if any ties to bring us together in a short time. Making us all look good to each other is a way to promote bonding, or will be, once we start training.”

“I don’t see how it’s going to help the army if we’re all too busy ogling each other to fight,” Thomas said.

“It’s not about that,” Maggie said. “Sexual attraction is just a side issue here. It’s a matter of quickly instilling trust and devotion. People instinctively trust and want to help people they find attractive, regardless of sexual desire. It’s why newscasters are always attractive. It’s why attractive people don’t have to work as hard in school.”

“But we’re all attractive now,” I said. “In the land of the incredibly attractive, the merely good-looking could be in trouble.”

“And even now, some of us look better than others,” Thomas said. “Every time I look at Maggie, I feel like the oxygen is being sucked from the room. No offense, Maggie.”

“None taken,” Maggie said. “The baseline here isn’t each other as we are now, anyway. It’s how we all appeared before. In the short term, that’s reflexively the baseline we’ll use, and a short-term advantage is all they’d be looking for anyway.”

“So you’re saying that you don’t feel oxygen-deprived when you look at me,” Susan said to Thomas.

“It’s not meant to be an insult,” Thomas said.

“I’ll remember that when I’m strangling you,” Susan said. “Speaking of oxygen-deprived.”

“Stop flirting, you two,” Alan said, and turned his attention to Maggie. “I think you’re right about the attraction thing, but I think you’re forgetting the one person we’re supposed to be the most attracted to: ourselves. For better or worse, these bodies we’re in are still alien to us. I mean, between the fact that I’m green and I’ve got a computer named ‘Dipshit’ in my head—” He stopped, and looked at us all. “What did you all name your BrainPals?”

“Asshole,” I said.

"Bitch," Jesse said.

"Dickwad," said Thomas.

"Fuckhead," said Harry.

"Satan," said Maggie.

"Sweetie," said Susan. "Apparently, I'm the only one who likes my BrainPal."

"More like you were the only one who wasn't disturbed by having a voice suddenly appear in your skull," Alan said. "But this is my point. Suddenly becoming young and having massive physical and mechanical changes takes a toll on one's psyche. Even if we're glad to be young again—and I know I am—we're still going to be alienated from our new selves. Making us look good to ourselves is one way to help us get 'settled in.'"

"These are crafty people we're dealing with," Harry said with ominous finality.

"Oh, lighten up, Harry," Jesse said, and gave him a little nudge. "You're the only person I know who would turn being young and sexy into a dark conspiracy."

"You think I'm sexy?" Harry said.

"You're dreamy, sweetheart," Jesse said, and batted her eyes dramatically at him.

Harry cracked a goofy grin. "That's the first time this century anyone's said *that* to me. Okay, I'm sold."

The man who stood in front of the theater full of recruits was a battle-tested veteran. Our BrainPals informed us that he'd been in the Colonial Defense Forces for fourteen years and had participated in several battles, the names of which meant nothing to us now, but no doubt would at some point in the future. This man had gone to new places, met new races and exterminated them on sight. He looked all of twenty-three years old.

"Good evening, recruits," he began after we had all settled down. "I am Lieutenant Colonel Bryan Higgee, and for the remainder of your journey, I will be your commanding officer. As a practical matter, this means very little—between now and our arrival at Beta Pyxis III, one

week from now, you will have only one command objective. However, it will serve to remind you that from this point forward, you are subject to Colonial Defense Forces rules and regulations. You have your new bodies now, and with those new bodies will come new responsibilities.

"You may be wondering about your new bodies, as to what they can do, what stresses they can endure and how you can use them in the service of the Colonial Defense Forces. All these questions will be answered soon, as you begin your training on Beta Pyxis III. Right now, however, our main goal is simply for you to become comfortable in your new skins.

"And so, for the remainder of your trip, here are your orders: Have fun."

That brought up a murmur and some scattered laughter in the ranks. The idea of having fun being an order was amusingly counterintuitive. Lieutenant Colonel Higgee showed a mirthless grin.

"I understand this appears to be an unusual order. Be that as it may, having fun with your new body is going to be the best way for you to get used to the new abilities you have. When you begin your training, top performance will be required of you from the very start. There will be no 'ramp-up'—there's no time for that. The universe is a dangerous place. Your training will be short and difficult. We can't afford to have you uncomfortable with your body.

"Recruits, consider this next week as a bridge between your old lives and your new ones. In this time, which you will ultimately find all too brief, you can use these new bodies, designed for military use, to enjoy the pleasures you enjoyed as a civilian. You'll find the *Henry Hudson* is filled with recreations and activities you've loved on Earth. Use them. Enjoy them. Get used to working with your new bodies. Learn a little about their potential and see if you can divine their limits.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we will meet again for a final briefing before you begin your training. Until then, have fun. I do not exaggerate when I say that while life in the Colonial Defense Forces has its rewards, this may be the last time you will be entirely carefree in your new bodies. I suggest you use this time wisely. I suggest you have fun. That is all; you're dismissed."

We all went *insane*.

Let's start, of course, with the sex. Everyone was doing it with everybody else, in more places on the ship than it is probably sensible to discuss. After the first day, in which it became clear that any semisecluded place was going to be used for enthusiastic humping, it became courteous to make a lot of noise as one moved about, to alert the conjugal that you were on your way in. Sometime during the second day it became general knowledge that I had a room to myself; I was besieged with pleas for access. They were summarily denied. I'd never operated a house of ill repute, and I wasn't about to start now. The only people who were going to fuck around in my room were me and any invited guests.

There was only one of those. And it wasn't Jesse; it was Maggie, who, as it turned out, had had a thing for me even when I was wrinkled. After our briefing with Higgee, she more or less ambushed me at my door, which made me wonder if this was somehow standard operating procedure for post-change women. Regardless, she was great fun and, in private at least, not in the least retiring. It turned out that she had been a professor at Oberlin College. She taught philosophy of Eastern religions. She wrote six books on the subject. The things you learn about people.

The other Old Farts also stuck to their own. Jesse paired up with Harry after our initial fling, while Alan, Tom and Susan worked out some arrangement with Tom in the center. It was good that Tom liked to eat a lot; he needed his strength.

The ferocity at which the recruits went for sex undoubtedly appears unseemly from the outside, but it made perfect sense from where we stood (or lay, or were bent over upon). Take a group of people who generally have had little sex, due to lack of partners or declining health and libido, stuff them into brand-new young, attractive and highly functional bodies and then hurl them into space far away from anything they ever knew and everyone they ever loved. The combination of the three was a recipe for sex. We did it because we could, and because it beats being lonely.

It's not the only thing we did, of course. Using these gorgeous new bodies only for sex would be like singing only one note. Our bodies

were claimed to be new and improved, and we found it to be true in simple and surprising ways. Harry and I had to call off a Ping-Pong game when it became clear neither of us was going to win—not because we were both incompetent, but because our reflexes and hand-eye coordination made it damn near impossible to get the ball past the other guy. We volleyed for thirty minutes and would have gone longer if the Ping-Pong ball we were using hadn't cracked from the force of being hit at such tremendously high speeds. It was ridiculous. It was marvelous.

Other recruits found out the same thing we did in other ways. On the third day, I was in a crowd that watched two recruits engage in what was possibly the most thrilling martial arts battle ever; they did things with their bodies that simply shouldn't have been possible assuming normal human flexibility and standard gravity. At one point, one of the men placed a kick that launched the other halfway across the room; instead of collapsing in a pile of broken bones, as I'm sure I would have, the other guy did a backflip *midflight,* righted himself, and launched himself back at his opponent. It looked like a special effect. In a way it was.

After the battle, both men breathed deeply and bowed to his opponent. And then both of them collapsed onto each other, simultaneously laughing and sobbing hysterically. It's a weird, wonderful and yet troubling thing to be as good at something as you ever wanted to be, and then to be even better than that.

People went too far, of course. I personally saw one recruit leap off a high landing, either under the assumption that she could fly or, barring that, at least land without injury. My understanding is that she shattered her right leg, right arm, jaw, and cracked her skull. However, she was still alive after the leap, a state of affairs that probably wouldn't have existed back on Earth. More impressively, however, she was back in action two days later, which obviously spoke more to the Colonial medical technology than this silly woman's recuperative powers. I hope someone told her not to do such a stupid move in the future.

When people weren't playing with their bodies, they were playing with their minds, or with their BrainPals, which was close enough. As I would walk about the ship, I would frequently see recruits simply

sitting around, eyes closed, slowly nodding their heads. They were listening to music or watching a movie or something similar, the piece of work called up in their brain for them alone. I'd done it myself; while searching the ship's system, I had come across a compilation of every Looney Tunes cartoon created, both during their classic Warner days and then after the characters were put into the public domain. I spent hours one night watching Wile E. Coyote get smashed and blown up; I finally stopped when Maggie demanded I choose between her and Road Runner. I chose her. I could pick Road Runner anytime, after all. I had downloaded all the cartoons into Asshole.

"Choosing friends" was something I did a lot of. All of the Old Farts knew that our group was temporary at best; we were simply seven people thrown together at random, in a situation that had no hope for permanence. But we became friends, and close friends at that, in the short period of time we had together. It's no exaggeration to say that I became as close to Thomas, Susan, Alan, Harry, Jesse and Maggie as I had to anyone in the last half of my "normal" life. We became a band, and a family, down to the petty digs and squabbles. We gave one another someone to care about, which was something we needed in a universe that didn't know or cared that we existed.

We bonded. And we did it even before we were biologically prodded to do so by the colonies' scientists. And as the *Henry Hudson* drew closer to our final destination, I knew I was going to miss them.

"In this room right now are 1,022 recruits," Lieutenant Colonel Higgee said. "Two years from today, 400 of you will be dead."

Higgee stood in the front of the theater, again. This time, he had a backdrop: Beta Pyxis III floated behind him, a massive marble streaked with blue, white, green and brown. We were all ignoring it and focusing on Lieutenant Colonel Higgee. His statistic had gotten everyone's attention, a feat considering the time (0600 hours) and the fact that most of us were still staggering from the last night of freedom we assumed we would have.

"In the third year," he continued, "another 100 of you will die. Another 150 in years four and five. After ten years—and yes, recruits,

you *will* most likely be required to serve a full ten years—750 of you will have been killed in the line of duty. Three-quarters of you, gone. These have been the survival statistics—not just for the last ten or twenty years, but for the over two hundred years the Colonial Defense Forces have been active."

There was dead silence.

"I know what you're thinking right now, because I was thinking it when I was in your place," Lieutenant Colonel Higgee said. "You're thinking—what the hell am I doing here? This guy is telling me I'm going to be dead in ten years! But remember that back home, you most likely would have been dead in ten years, too—frail and old, dying a useless death. You may die in the Colonial Defense Forces. You probably *will* die in the Colonial Defense Forces. But your death will not be a useless one. You'll have died to keep humanity alive in our universe."

The screen behind Higgee blanked out, to be replaced with a three-dimensional star field. "Let me explain our position," he said, and as he did, several dozen of the stars burned bright green, randomly distributed across the field. "Here are the systems where humans have colonized—gained a foothold in the galaxy. And these are where alien races of comparable technology and survival requirements are known to exist." This time hundreds of stars blazed up, redly. The human points of light were utterly surrounded. Gasps were heard in the theater.

"Humanity has two problems," Lieutenant Colonel Higgee said. "The first is that it is in a race with other sentient and similar species to colonize. Colonization is the key to our race's survival. It's as simple as that. We must colonize or be closed off and contained by other races. This competition is fierce. Humanity has few allies among the sentient races. Very few races are allies with anyone, a situation that existed long before humanity stepped into the stars.

"Whatever your feelings about the possibility for diplomacy in the long run, the reality is that on the ground, we are in fierce and furious competition. We cannot hold back our expansion and hope that we can achieve a peaceful solution that allows for colonization by all races. To do so would be to condemn humanity. So we fight to colonize.

"Our second problem is that when we do find planets suitable for colonization, they are often inhabited by intelligent life. When we can, we live with native population and work to achieve harmony. Unfortunately, much of the time, we are not welcome. It is regrettable when this happens, but the needs of humanity are and must be our priority. And so the Civil Defense Forces become an invading force."

The background switched back to Beta Pyxis III. "In a perfect universe, we would not need the Colonial Defense Forces," Higgee said. "But this is not that perfect universe. And so, the Colonial Defense Forces have three mandates. The first is to protect existing human colonies and protect them from attack and invasion. The second is to locate new planets suitable for colonization, and hold them against predation, colonization and invasion from competing races. The third is to prepare planets with native populations for human colonization.

"As Colonial Defense Forces soldiers, you will be required to uphold all three mandates. This is not easy work, nor is it simple work, nor is it clean work, in any number of ways. But it must be done. The survival of humanity demands it—and we will demand it of you.

"Three-quarters of you will die in ten years. Despite improvements to soldiers' bodies, weapons and technology, this is a constant. But in your wake, you leave the universe as a place where your children, their children, and all the children of humanity can grow and thrive. It's a high cost, and one worth paying.

"Some of you may wonder what you'll get personally from your service. What you'll get after your term of service is another new life. You will be able to colonize and to start again, on a new world. The Colonial Defense Forces will back your claim and provide you with everything you'll need. We can't promise you success in your new life—that's up to you. But you'll have an excellent start, and you'll have the gratitude of your fellow colonists for your time of service to them and theirs. Or you can do as I have, and reenlist. You might be surprised at how many do."

Beta Pyxis III flickered momentarily and then disappeared, leaving Higgee as the sole focus of attention. "I hope you all took my advice to have fun in this last week," he said. "Now your work begins. In one hour, you will be transported off the *Henry Hudson* to begin your

training. There are several training bases here; your assignments are being transmitted to your BrainPals. You may return to your rooms to pack your personal belongings; don't bother with clothing, it will be provided on base. Your BrainPal will inform you where to assemble for transport.

"Good luck, recruits. May God protect you, and may you serve humanity with distinction, and with pride."

And then Lieutenant Colonel Higgee saluted us. I didn't know what to do. Neither did anyone else.

"You have your orders," Lieutenant Colonel Higgee said. "You are dismissed."

The seven of us stood together, crowding around the seats in which we just sat.

"They certainly don't leave much time for good-byes," Jesse said.

"Check your computers," Harry said. "Maybe some of us are going to the same bases."

We checked. Harry and Susan were reporting to Alpha Base; Jesse to Beta. Maggie and Thomas were Gamma; Alan and I were Delta.

"They're breaking up the Old Farts," Thomas said.

"Don't get all misty," Susan said. "You knew it was coming."

"I'll get misty if I want," Thomas said. "I don't know anyone else. I'll even miss you, you old bag."

"We're forgetting something," Harry said. "We may not be together, but we can still keep in touch. We have our BrainPals. All we have to do is create a mailbox for each other. The 'Old Farts' clubhouse."

"That works here," Jesse said. "But I don't know about when we're in active duty. We could be on the other side of the galaxy from each other."

"The ships still communicate with each other through Phoenix," Alan said. "Each ship has skip drones that go to Phoenix to pick up orders and to communicate ship status. They carry mail, too. It might take a while for our news to reach each other, but it'll still reach us."

"Like sending messages in bottles," Maggie said. "Bottles with superior firepower."

"Let's do it," Harry said. "Let's be our own little family. Let's look out for each other, no matter where we are."

"Now you're getting misty, too," Susan said.

"I'm not worried about missing *you*, Susan," Harry said. "I'm taking you with me. It's the rest of these guys I'll miss."

"A pact, then," I said. "To stay the Old Farts, through thick and thin. Look out, universe." I held out my hand. One by one, each of the Old Farts put their hand on mine.

"Christ," Susan said as she put her hand on the pile. "Now *I'm* misty."

"It'll pass," Alan said. Susan hit him lightly with her other hand.

We stayed that way as long as we could.

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PART II

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SEVEN

On a far plain on Beta Pyxis III, Beta Pyxis, the local sun, was just beginning its eastward journey up the sky; the composition of the atmosphere gave the sky an aqua tint, greener than Earth's but still nominally blue. On the rolling plain, grasses waved purple and orange in the morning breeze; birdlike animals with two sets of wings could be seen playing the sky, testing out the currents and eddies with wild, chaotic swoops and dives. This was our first morning on a new world, the first I or any of my former shipmates had ever set upon. It was beautiful. If there hadn't been a large, angry master sergeant on it, bellowing in my ear, it would have been just about perfect.

Alas, there was.

"Christ on a Popsicle stick," Master Sergeant Antonio Ruiz declared after he had glared at the sixty of us in his recruit platoon, standing (we hoped) more or less at attention on the tarmac of Delta Base's shuttleport. "We have clearly just lost the battle for the goddamn universe. I look at you people and the words 'tremendously fucked' leap right out of my goddamned skull. If you're the best that the Earth has got to offer, it's time we bend over and get a tentacle right up the ass."

This got an involuntary chuckle from several recruits. Master Sergeant Antonio Ruiz could have come from central casting. He was exactly what you expected from a drill instructor—large, angry and colorfully abusive right from the get-go. No doubt in the next few seconds, he would get into one of the amused recruit's faces, hurl

obscenities and demand one hundred push-ups. This is what you get from watching seventy-five years' worth of war dramas.

"Ha, ha, ha," Master Sergeant Antonio Ruiz said, back at us. "Don't think I don't know what you're thinking, you dumb shits. I know you're enjoying my performance at the moment. How delightful! I'm just like all those drill instructors you've seen in the movies! Aren't I just the fucking quaint one!"

The amused chuckles had come to a stop. That last bit was not in the script.

"You don't *understand,*" Master Sergeant Antonio Ruiz said. "You're under the impression that I'm talking like this because this is just something drill instructors are *supposed* to do. You're under the impression that after a few weeks of training, my gruff but fair façade will begin to slip and I will show some inkling of being impressed with the lot of you, and that at the end of your training, you'll have earned my grudging respect. You're under the impression I'll think fondly of you while you're off making the universe safe for humanity, secure in the knowledge I've made you better fighting men and women. Your *impression,* ladies and gentlemen, is completely and irrevocably fucked."

Master Sergeant Antonio Ruiz stepped forward and paced down the line. "Your impression is fucked, because unlike you, I have actually been out in the universe. I have seen what we're up against. I have seen men and women that I knew personally turned into hot fucking chunks of meat that could still manage to scream. On my first tour of duty, my commanding officer was turned into a goddamn alien lunch buffet. I watched as the fuckers grabbed him, pinned him to the ground, sliced out his internal organs, passed them out and gobbled them down—and slid back under the ground before any of us could do a goddamned thing."

A stifled giggle from somewhere behind me. Master Sergeant Antonio Ruiz stopped and cocked his head. "Oh. One of you thinks I'm *kidding*. One of you dumb motherfuckers always does. That's why I keep *this* around. Activate now," he said, and suddenly in front of each of us a video screen appeared; it took me a disorienting second before I realized Ruiz had somehow managed to activate my BrainPal

remotely, switching on a video feed. The feed appeared to be taken from a small helmet camera. We saw several soldiers hunkered down in a foxhole, discussing plans for the next day's travel. Then one of the soldiers stopped talking for a second and slammed a palm down onto the dirt. He glanced up fearfully and yelled "incoming" a split second before the ground erupted beneath him.

What happened next happened so quickly that not even the instinctive, panicked turn of the camera's owner was fast enough to miss it all. It was not pleasant. In the real world, someone was vomiting, ironically matching the action of the camera's owner. Blessedly, the video feed switched off right after that.

"I'm not so funny now, am I?" Master Sergeant Antonio Ruiz said, mockingly. "I'm not that happy fucking stereotypical drill instructor anymore, am I? You're not in a military comedy anymore, are you? Welcome to the fucking universe! The universe is a fucked-up place, my friends. And I'm not talking to you like this because I'm putting on some amusing little drill instructor routine. That man who was sliced and diced was among the best fighting men I have ever had the privilege of knowing. None of you are his equal. And yet you see what happened to *him*. Think what will happen to *you*. I'm talking to you like this because I sincerely believe, from the bottom of my heart, that if you're the best humanity can do, we are magnificently and totally fucked. Do you believe me?"

Some of our number managed to mumble a "Yes, sir" or something close to it. The rest of us were still replaying the evisceration in our heads, without the benefit of the BrainPal.

"Sir? Sir?!? I am a fucking master sergeant, you shitheads. I work for a living! You will answer with 'Yes, Master Sergeant' when you need to answer in the affirmative, and 'No, Master Sergeant' when you answer in the negative. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master Sergeant!" we replied.

"You can do better than that! Say it again!"

"Yes, Master Sergeant!" we screamed. Some of us were clearly on the verge of tears by the sound of that last bellow.

"For the next twelve weeks, my job is to attempt to train you to be soldiers, and by God, I am going to do it, and I'm going to do it despite

the fact that I can already tell that none of you motherfuckers is up to the challenge. I want each of you to think about what I'm saying here. This isn't the old-time Earth military, where drill sergeants had to tone up the fat, bulk up the weak, or educate the stupid—each of you comes with a lifetime of experience and a new body that is in peak physical condition. You would think that would make my job easier. It. Does. Not.

"Each of you has seventy-five years of bad habits and personal feelings of entitlement that I have to purge in three goddamn months. And each of you thinks your new body is some kind of shiny new toy. Yeah, I know what you've been doing for the last week. You've been fucking like rabid monkeys. Guess what? Playtime is *over*. For the next twelve weeks, you'll be lucky if you have time to jerk off in the shower. Your shiny new toy is going to be put to work, my pretties. Because I have to make you into soldiers. And *that* is going to be a full-time job."

Ruiz resumed his pacing in front of the recruits. "I want to make one thing clear. I do not like, nor will I ever like, any one of you. Why? Because I know that despite the fine work of myself and my staff, you will inevitably make all of us look bad. It *pains* me. It keeps me awake at night knowing that no matter how much I teach you, you will inevitably fail those who fight with you. The best I can do is make sure that when you go, you don't take your whole fucking platoon down with you. That's right—if you only get *yourself* killed, I count that as a success!

"Now, you may think that this is some sort of generalized hatred that I will carry for the lot of you. Let me assure you that this is not the case. Each of you will fail, but you will fail in your own unique way, and therefore I will dislike each of you on an individual basis. Why, even now, each of you has qualities that irritate the living fuck out of me. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, Master Sergeant!"

"Bullshit! Some of you are still thinking that I'm just going to hate the other guy." Ruiz shot out an arm and pointed out toward the plain and the rising sun. "Use your pretty new eyes to focus on that transmission tower out there; you can just barely see it. It is ten klicks away, ladies and gentlemen. I'm going to find something about each of

you that will piss me off, and when I do, you will *sprint* to that fucking tower. If you are not back in an hour, this entire platoon will run it again tomorrow morning. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master Sergeant!" I could see people trying to do the math in their heads; he was telling us to run five-minute miles all the way there and all the way back. I strongly suspected we'd be running it again tomorrow.

"Which of you was in the military back on Earth? Step up, now," Ruiz asked. Seven recruits stepped forward.

"God *damn* it," Ruiz said. "There is nothing I hate more in the entire fucking universe than a veteran recruit. We have to spend extra time and effort on you bastards, making you unlearn every single fucking thing you learned back home. All you sons of bitches had to do was fight humans! And even that you did badly! Oh, yes, we *saw* that whole Subcontinental War of yours. Shit. Six fucking years to beat an enemy that barely had firearms, and you had to cheat to win. Nukes are for pussies. *Pussies*. If the CDF fought like the U.S. forces fought, you know where humanity would be today? On an asteroid, scraping algae off the fucking tunnel *walls*. And which ones of you assholes are Marines?"

Two recruits stepped forward. "You fuckers are the *worst,*" Ruiz said, getting right in their faces. "You smug bastards have killed more CDF soldiers than any alien species—doing things that Marine fucking way instead of the way they're *supposed* to be done. You probably had 'Semper Fi' tattoos somewhere on your old body, didn't you? Didn't you?"

"Yes, Master Sergeant!" they both replied.

"You are so fucking lucky they were left behind, because I *swear* I would have held you down and sliced them off myself. Oh, and you don't think I wouldn't? Well, unlike your precious fucking Marines, or any other military branch down there, up here the drill instructor *is* God. I could turn your fucking intestines into a sausage pie and all that would happen to me is they'd tell me to get one of the other recruits to mop up the mess." Ruiz stepped back to glare at all the veteran recruits. "This is the *real* military, ladies and gentlemen. You're not in the army, navy, air force, or Marines now. You're one of us. And every time you

forget it, I'm going to be there to step on your fucking head. Now start running!"

They ran.

"Who's homosexual?" Ruiz said. Four recruits stepped forward, including Alan, who was standing next to me. I saw his eyebrows arch as he stepped up.

"Some of the finest soldiers in history were homosexual," Ruiz said. "Alexander the Great. Richard the Lionhearted. The Spartans had a special platoon of soldiers who were gay lovers, on the idea that a man would fight harder to protect his lover than he would for just another soldier. Some of the best fighters I ever knew personally were as queer as a three-dollar bill. Damn fine soldiers, all of them.

"But I will tell you the one thing that pisses me off about you all: You pick the wrong fucking moments to get confessional. *Three separate times* I've been fighting alongside a gay man when things have gone sour, and each fucking time he chooses *that* moment to tell me how he's always loved me. God*damn,* that's inappropriate. Some alien is trying to suck out my fucking brains, and my squadmate wants to talk about our relationship! As if I wasn't already *busy*. Do your squadmates a fucking favor. You got the hots, deal with it on leave, not when some creature is trying to rip out your goddamn heart. Now run!" Off they went.

"Who's a minority?" Ten recruits stepped forward. "Bullshit. Look around you, you assholes. Up here, everyone is green. There are no minorities. You want to be in a fucking minority? Fine. There are twenty billion humans in the universe. There are four *trillion* members of other sentient species, and they *all* want to turn you into a midday snack. And those are only the ones we know about! The first one of you who bitches about being a minority up here will get my green Latino foot squarely up your whiny ass. Move!" They heaved out toward the plain.

On it went. Ruiz had specific complaints against Christians, Jews, Muslims and atheists, government workers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, blue-collar joes, pet owners, gun owners, practitioners of martial arts, wrestling fans and, weirdly (both for the fact it bothered him and the fact that there was someone in the platoon who fit the category), clog

dancers. In groups, pairs, and singly, recruits were peeled off and forced to run.

Eventually, I became aware that Ruiz was looking directly at me. I remained at attention.

"I will be goddamned," Ruiz said. "One of you shitheads is left!"

"Yes, Master Sergeant!" I yelled as loudly as I could.

"I find it somewhat difficult to believe that you do not fit into any of the categories I have railed against!" Ruiz said. "I suspect that you are attempting to avoid a pleasant morning jog!"

"No, Master Sergeant!" I bellowed.

"I simply refuse to acknowledge that there is not something about you I despise," Ruiz said. "Where are you from?"

"Ohio, Master Sergeant!"

Ruiz grimaced. Nothing there. Ohio's utter inoffensiveness had finally worked to my advantage. "What did you do for a living, recruit?"

"I was self-employed, Master Sergeant!"

"As what?"

"I was a writer, Master Sergeant!"

Ruiz's feral grin was back; obviously he had it in for those who worked with words. "Tell me you wrote fiction, recruit," he said. "I have a bone to pick with novelists."

"No, Master Sergeant!"

"Christ, man! What did you write?"

"I wrote advertising copy, Master Sergeant!"

"Advertising! What sort of dumbass things did you advertise?"

"My most famous advertising work involved Willie Wheelie, Master Sergeant!" Willie Wheelie had been the mascot for Nirvana Tires, who made tires for specialty vehicles. I'd developed the basic idea and his tagline; the company's graphic artists took it from there. Willie Wheelie's arrival coincided with the revival of motorcycles; the fad lasted for several years and Willie made a fair amount of money for Nirvana, both as an advertising mascot and through licensing for plush toys, T-shirts, shot glasses and so on. A children's entertainment show was planned but nothing came of it. It was a silly thing, but on the

other hand Willie's success meant I never ran out of clients. It worked out pretty well. Until this very moment, it seemed.

Ruiz suddenly lunged forward, directly into my face, and bellowed. "*You* are the mastermind behind Willie Wheelie, recruit?"

"Yes, Master Sergeant!" There was a perverse pleasure in screaming at someone whose face was just millimeters away from your own.

Ruiz hovered in my face for a few seconds, scanning it with his eyes, daring me to flinch. He actually snarled. Then he stepped back and began to unbutton his shirt. I remained at attention but suddenly I was very, very scared. He whipped off his shirt, turned his right shoulder to me, and stepped forward again. "Recruit, tell me what you see on my shoulder!"

I glanced down, and thought, *No fucking way*. "It is a tattoo of Willie Wheelie, Master Sergeant!"

"Goddamn right," snapped Ruiz. "I'm going to tell you a story, recruit. Back on Earth, I was married to an evil, vicious woman. A veritable pit viper. Such was her hold on me that even though being married to her was a slow death by paper cuts, I still felt suicidal when she demanded a divorce. At my lowest moment, I stood at a bus stand, contemplating hurling myself in front of the next bus that came along. Then I looked over and saw an advertisement with Willie Wheelie in it. And do you know what it said?"

"'Sometimes You Just Gotta Hit the Road,' Master Sergeant!" That tagline had taken me all of fifteen seconds to write. What a world.

"Exactly," he said. "And as I stared at that ad, I had what some would call a Moment of Clarity—I knew that what I needed was to just hit the fucking road. I divorced the evil slug of a wife, sang a song of thanks, packed my belongings into a saddlebag and lit out. Ever since that blessed day, Willie Wheelie has been my avatar, the symbol of my desire for personal freedom and expression. He saved my life, recruit, and I am forever grateful."

"You're welcome, Master Sergeant!" I bellowed.

"Recruit, I am honored that I have had a chance to meet you; you are additionally the first recruit in the history of my tenure that I have not found immediate grounds to despise. I cannot tell you how much that disturbs and unnerves me. However, I bask in the almost certain

knowledge that soon—possibly within the next few hours—you will undoubtedly do something to piss me off. To assure that you do, in fact, I assign to you the role of platoon leader. It is a thankless fucking job that has no upside, since you have to ride these sad-ass recruits twice as hard as I do, because for every one of the numerous fuckups that they perform, you will also share the blame. They will hate you, despise you, plot your downfall, and I will be there to give you an extra ration of shit when they succeed. What do you think about that, recruit? Speak freely!"

"It sounds like I'm pretty fucked, Master Sergeant!" I yelled.

"That you are, recruit," Ruiz said. "But you were fucked the moment you landed in my platoon. Now get running. Can't have the leader not run with his 'toon. Move!"

"I don't know whether to congratulate you or be scared for you," Alan said to me as we headed toward the mess hall for breakfast.

"You can do both," I said. "Although it probably makes more sense to be scared. I am. Ah, there they are." I pointed to a group of five recruits, three men, two women, who were milling about in front of the mess hall.

Earlier in the day, as I was heading toward the communication tower on my run, my BrainPal almost caused me to collide with a tree by flashing a text message directly into my field of view. I managed to swerve, merely clipping a shoulder, and told Asshole to switch to voice navigation before I got myself killed. Asshole complied and started the message over.

"*Master Sergeant Antonio Ruiz's appointment of John Perry as leader of the 63rd Training Platoon has been processed. Congratulations on your advancement. You now have access to personnel files and BrainPal information relating to recruits within the 63rd Training Platoon. Be aware that this information is for official use only; access for nonmilitary use is cause for immediate termination of platoon leader position and a court-martial trial at the base commander's discretion.*"

"Swell," I said, leaping a small gully.

"You will need to present Master Sergeant Ruiz with your selections for squad leaders by the end of your platoon's breakfast period," Asshole continued. *"Would you like to review your platoon files to aid in your selection process?"*

I would. I did. Asshole spewed out details at high speed on each recruit as I ran. By the time I made it to the comm tower, I had narrowed the list to twenty candidates; by the time I was nearing the base, I'd parceled out the entire platoon among squad leaders and sent mail to each of the five new squad leaders to meet me at the mess hall. That BrainPal was certainly beginning to come in handy.

I also noted that I managed to make it back to base in fifty-five minutes, and I hadn't passed any other recruits on the way back. I consulted Asshole and discovered that the slowest of the recruits (one of the former Marines, ironically) had clocked in at fifty-eight minutes thirteen seconds. We wouldn't be running to the comm tower tomorrow, or at least not because we were slow. I didn't doubt Sergeant Ruiz's ability to find another excuse, however. I was just hoping not to be the one to give it to him.

The five recruits saw me and Alan coming and snapped, more or less, to attention. Three of them saluted immediately, followed somewhat sheepishly by the other two. I saluted back and smiled. "Don't fret it," I said to the two who lagged. "This is new to me, too. Come on, let's get in line and talk while we eat."

"Do you want me to light out?" Alan asked me while we were in line. "You've probably got a lot to cover with these guys."

"No," I said. "I'd like you there. I want your opinion on these guys. Also, I have news for you, you're my second in command in our own squad. And since I've got a whole platoon to babysit, that means you're really going to be in charge of it. Hope you don't mind."

"I can handle it," Alan said, smiling. "Thanks for putting me in your squad."

"Hey," I said. "What's the point of being in charge if you can't indulge in pointless favoritism. Besides, when I go down, you'll be there to cushion my fall."

"That's me," Alan said. "Your military career air bag."

The mess hall was packed but the seven of us managed to commandeer a table. "Introductions," I said. "Let's know each other's names. I'm John Perry, and for the moment at least I'm platoon leader. This is my squad's second in command, Alan Rosenthal."

"Angela Merchant," said the woman immediately across from me. "Of Trenton, New Jersey."

"Terry Duncan," said the fellow next to her. "Missoula, Montana."

"Mark Jackson. St. Louis."

"Sarah O'Connell. Boston."

"Martin Garabedian. Sunny Fresno, California."

"Well, aren't we geographically diverse," I said. That got a chuckle, which was good. "I'll be quick about this, since if I spend any amount of time on this it'll be clear that I have no idea what the hell I'm doing. Basically, you five got chosen because there's something in your history that suggests that you'd be able to handle being a squad leader. I chose Angela because she was a CEO. Terry ran a cattle ranch. Mark was a colonel in the army, and with all respect to Sergeant Ruiz, I actually do think that's an advantage."

"That's nice to hear," Mark said.

"Martin was on the Fresno city council. And Sarah here taught kindergarten for thirty years, which automatically makes her the most qualified of all of us." Another laugh. Man, I was on a roll.

"I'm going to be honest," I said. "I'm not planning to be a hard-ass on you. Sergeant Ruiz has got that job covered, and I'd just be a pale imitation. It's not my style. I don't know what your command style will be, but I want you to do what you need to do to keep on top of your recruits and to get them through the next three months. I don't really care about being platoon leader, but I think I care very much about making sure every recruit in this platoon has the skills and training they're going to need to survive out there. Ruiz's little home movie got my attention and I hope it got yours."

"Christ, did it ever," Terry said. "They dressed that poor bastard out like he was beef."

"I wish they had shown us that before we signed up," Angela said. "I might have decided to stay old."

"It's war," Mark said. "It's what happens."

"Let's just do what we can to make sure our guys make it through things like that," I said. "Now, I've cut the platoon into six squads of ten. I'm top of A squad; Angela, you have B; Terry, C; Mark, D; Sarah, E; and Martin, F. I've given you permission to examine your recruit files with your BrainPal; choose your second in command and send me the details by lunch today. Between the two of you, keep discipline and training going smoothly; from my point of view, my whole reason for selecting you folks is so I don't have anything to do."

"Except run your own squad," Martin said.

"That's where I come in," Alan said.

"Let's meet every day at lunch," I said. "We'll take other meals with our squads. If you have something that needs my attention, of course contact me immediately. But I *do* expect you to attempt to solve as many problems as you can by yourself. Like I said, I'm not planning on having a hard-ass style, but for better or worse, I am the platoon leader, so what I say goes. If I feel you're not measuring up, I'm going to let you know first, and then if that doesn't work I'm going to replace you. It's not personal, it's making sure we all get the training we need to live out here. Everyone good with that?" Nods all around.

"Excellent," I said, and held up my tumbler. "Then let's toast to the 63rd Training Platoon. Here's to making it through in one piece." We clunked our tumblers together and then got to eating and chatting. Things were looking up, I thought.

It didn't take long to change *that* opinion.

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EIGHT

The day on Beta Pyxis is twenty-two hours thirteen minutes twenty-four seconds long. We got two of those hours to sleep.

I discovered this charming fact on our first night, when Asshole blasted me with a piercing siren that jolted me awake so quickly I fell out of my bunk, which was, of course, the top bunk. After checking to make sure my nose wasn't broken, I read the text floating in my skull.

Platoon Leader Perry, this is to inform you that you have—and here there was a number, at that second being one minute and forty-eight seconds and counting down—until Master Sergeant Ruiz and his assistants enter your barracks. You are expected to have your platoon awake and at attention when they enter. Any recruits not at attention will be disciplined and noted against your record.

I immediately forwarded the message to my squad leaders through the communication grouping I had created for them the day before, sent a general alarm signal to the platoon's BrainPals, and hit the barrack lights. There were a few amusing seconds as every recruit in the platoon jerked awake to a blast of noise that only he or she could hear. Most leaped out of bed, deeply disoriented; I and the squad leaders grabbed the ones still lying down and yanked them out onto the floor. Within a minute we had everyone up and at attention, and the remaining few seconds were spent convincing a few particularly slow recruits that now was not the time to pee or dress or do anything but stand there and not piss off Ruiz when he came through the door.

Not that it mattered. "For fuck's sake," Ruiz declared. "Perry!"

"Yes, Master Sergeant!"

"What the hell were you doing for your two-minute warning? Jerking off? Your platoon is unready! They are not dressed for the exertions to which they will soon be tasked! What is your excuse?"

"Master Sergeant, the message stated that the platoon was required to be at attention when you and your staff arrived! It did not specify the need to dress!"

"Christ, Perry! Don't you assume that being dressed is part of being at attention?"

"I would not presume to assume, Master Sergeant!"

"'Presume to assume'? Are you being a smartass, Perry?"

"No, Master Sergeant!"

"Well, presume to get your platoon out to the parade ground, Perry. You have forty-five seconds. Move!"

"A squad!" I bellowed and ran at the same time, hoping to God my squad was following directly behind me. As I went through the door, I heard Angela hollering at B squad to follow her; I had chosen her well. We made it to the parade grounds, my squad forming in a line directly behind me. Angela formed her line directly to my right, with Terry and the rest forming subsequently. The last man of F squad formed up at the forty-four-second mark. Amazing. Around the parade grounds, other recruit platoons were also forming up, also in the same state of undress as the 63rd. I felt briefly relieved.

Ruiz strolled up momentarily, trailed by his two assistants. "Perry! What is the time!"

I accessed my BrainPal. "Oh one hundred local time, Master Sergeant!"

"Outstanding, Perry. You can tell time. What time was lights out?"

"Twenty-one hundred, Master Sergeant!"

"Correct again! Now some of you may be wondering why we're getting you up and running on two hours of sleep. Are we cruel? Sadistic? Trying to break you down? Yes we *are*. But these are *not* the reasons we have awakened you. The reason is simply this—*you don't need any more sleep*. Thanks to these pretty new bodies of yours, you get all the sleep you need in two hours! You've been sleeping eight hours a night because that's what you're used to. No longer, ladies and

gentlemen. All that sleep is wasting *my* time. Two hours is all you need, so from now on, two hours is all you will *get*.

"Now, then. Who can tell me why I had you run those twenty klicks in an hour yesterday?"

One recruit raised his hand. "Yes, Thompson?" Ruiz said. Either he had memorized the names of every platoon recruit, or he had his BrainPal on, providing him the information. I wouldn't hazard a guess as to which it was.

"Master Sergeant, you had us run because you hate each of us on an individual basis!"

"Excellent response, Thompson. However, you are only partially correct. I had you run twenty klicks in an hour because you *can*. Even the slowest of you finished the run two minutes under the cutoff time. That means that without training, without even a hint of *real* effort, every single one of you bastards can keep pace with Olympic gold medalists back on Earth.

"And do you know why that is? Do you? It's because *none of you is human anymore*. You're *better*. You just don't know it yet. Shit, you spent a week bouncing off the walls of a spaceship like little wind-up toys and you probably still don't understand what you're made of. Well, ladies and gentlemen, that is going to change. The first week of your training is all about making you believe. And you *will* believe. You're not going to have a *choice*."

And then we ran 25 kilometers in our underwear.

Twenty-five-klick runs. Seven-second hundred-meter sprints. Six-foot vertical jumps. Leaping across ten-meter holes in the ground. Lifting two hundred kilos of free weights. Hundreds upon hundreds of sit-ups, chin-ups, push-ups. As Ruiz said, the hard part was not doing these things—the hard part was believing they could be done. Recruits were falling and failing at every step of the way for what's best described as a lack of nerve. Ruiz and his assistants would fall on these recruits and scare them into performing (and then have me do push-ups because I or my squad leaders clearly hadn't scared them enough).

Every recruit—*every* recruit—had his or her moment of doubt. Mine came on the fourth day, when the 63rd Platoon arrayed itself around the base swimming pool, each recruit holding a twenty-five-kilo sack of sand in his or her arms.

"What is the weak point of the human body?" Ruiz asked as he circled around our platoon. "It's not the heart, or the brain, or the feet, or anywhere you think it is. I'll tell you what it is. It's the blood, and that's bad news because your blood is everywhere in your body. It carries oxygen, but it also carries disease. When you're wounded, blood clots, but often not fast enough to keep you from dying of blood loss. Although when it comes down to it, what everyone *really* dies of is oxygen deprivation—from blood being unavailable because it's spewed out on the fucking ground where it doesn't do you a goddamned bit of good.

"The Colonial Defense Forces, in their divine wisdom, have given human blood the boot. It's been replaced by SmartBlood. SmartBlood is made up of billions of nano-sized 'bots that do everything that blood did but better. It's not organic, so it's not vulnerable to biological threats. It speaks to your BrainPal to clot in milliseconds—you could lose a fucking leg and you wouldn't bleed out. Most importantly to you right now, each 'cell' of SmartBlood has four times the oxygen-carrying capacity of your natural red blood cells."

Ruiz stopped walking. "This is important to each of you right now because you're all about to jump into the pool with your sacks of sand. You will sink to the bottom. And you will *stay* there for no less than six minutes. Six minutes is enough to kill your average human, but each of *you* can stay down for that long and not lose a single brain cell. To give you incentive to stay down, the first of you that comes up gets latrine duty for a week. And if that recruit comes up before the six minutes are up, well, let's just say that each of you is going to develop a close-up and personal relationship with a shit hole somewhere on this base. Got it? Then in you go!"

We dove, and as promised, sank straight down to the bottom, three meters down. I began to freak out almost immediately. When I was a child, I fell into a covered pool, tore through the cover and spent several disoriented and terrified minutes trying to break through to the

surface. It wasn't long enough for me to actually begin to drown; it was just long enough for me to develop a lifelong aversion to having my head completely enveloped by water. After about thirty seconds, I began to feel like I needed a big, fresh gulp of air. There was no way I was going to last a minute, much less six.

I felt a tug. I turned a little wildly, and saw that Alan, who had dived in next to me, had reached over. Through the murk, I could see him tap his head and then point to mine. At that second, Asshole notified me that Alan was asking for a link. I subvocalized acceptance. I heard an emotionless simulacrum of Alan's voice in my head.

Something wrong—Alan asked.

Phobia—I subvocalized.

Don't panic—Alan responded. *Forget you're underwater*—

Not fucking likely—I replied.

Then fake it—Alan responded. *Check on your squads to see if anyone else is having trouble and help them*—

The eerie calm of Alan's simulated voice helped. I opened a channel to my squad leaders to check on them and ordered them to do the same with their squads. Each of them had one or two recruits on the edge of panic and worked to talk them down. Next to me, I could see Alan make an accounting of our own squad.

Three minutes, then four. In Martin's group, one of the recruits began to thrash, jerking his body back and forth as the bag of sand in his hand acted as an anchor. Martin dropped his own bag and swam over to his recruit, grabbing him roughly by the shoulders, and then bringing his recruit's attention to his face. I tapped into Martin's BrainPal and heard him say—*Focus on me on my eyes*—to his recruit. It seemed to help; the recruit stopped his thrashing and began to relax.

Five minutes, and it was clear that extended oxygen supply or not, everyone was beginning to feel the pinch. People began shifting from one foot to the other, or hopping in place, or waving their bags. Over in a corner, I could see one recruit slamming her head into her sandbag. Part of me laughed; part of me thought about doing it myself.

Five minutes forty-three seconds, and one of the recruits in Mark's squad dropped his bag and began heading for the surface. Mark dropped his bag and silently lunged, snagging the recruit by the ankle

and using his own weight to drag him back down. I was thinking Mark's second in command should probably help his squad leader with the recruit; a quick BrainPal check informed me that the recruit *was* his second in command.

Six minutes. Forty recruits dropped their bags and punched to the surface. Mark let go of his second in command's ankle and then pushed him from underneath to make sure he would break the surface first, and get the latrine duty he was willing to get for his whole platoon. I prepared to drop my sandbag when I caught Alan shaking his head.

Platoon leader—he sent. *Should stick it out*—

Blow me—I sent.

Sorry, not my type—he replied.

I made it through seven minutes and thirty-one seconds before I went up, convinced my lungs were going to explode. But I had made it through my moment of doubt. I believed. I was something more than human.

In the second week, we were introduced to our weapon.

"This is the CDF standard-issue MP-35 Infantry Rifle," Ruiz said, holding out his while ours sat where they had been placed, still within protective wrapping, in the parade-ground dirt at our feet. "The 'MP' stands for 'Multi-Purpose.' Depending on your need, it can create and fire on the fly six different projectiles or beams. These include rifle bullets and shot of both explosive and nonexplosive varieties, which can be fired semiautomatically or automatically, low-yield grenades, low-yield guided rockets, high-pressure flammable liquid, and microwave energy beams. This is possible through the use of high-density nano-robotic ammunition"—Ruiz held up a dully gleaming block of what appeared to be metal; a similar block was located next to the rifle at my feet—"that self-assembles immediately prior to firing. This allows for a weapon with maximum flexibility with minimum training, a fact that you sad lumps of ambulatory meat will no doubt appreciate.

"Those of you who have military experience will remember how you were required to frequently assemble and disassemble your weapon. *You will not do this with your MP-35*. The MP-35 is an

extremely complex piece of machinery and you cannot be trusted to fuck with it! It carries onboard self-diagnostic and repair capabilities. It can also patch into your BrainPal to alert you of problems, if any, which there will be none, since in thirty years of service there has yet to be an MP-35 that has malfunctioned. This is because, unlike your dipshit military scientists on Earth, *we* can build a weapon that works! Your job is not to fuck with your weapon; your job is to *fire* your weapon. Trust your weapon, it is almost certainly smarter than you are. Remember this and you may yet live.

"You will activate your MP-35 momentarily by taking it out of its protective wrapping, and accessing it with your BrainPal. Once you do this, your MP-35 will truly be yours. While you are on this base, only you will be able to fire your MP-35, and then only when you are given clearance from your platoon leader or your squad leaders, who must in turn get clearance from their drill instructors. In actual combat situations, only CDF soldiers with CDF-issued BrainPals will be able to fire your MP-35. So long as you don't piss off your own squadmates, you will never have to fear your own weapon being used against you.

"From this point forward you will take your MP-35 with you everywhere you go. You will take it with you when you take a shit. You will take it with you when you shower—don't worry about getting it wet, it will spit out anything it regards as foreign. You will take it to meals. You will sleep with it. If you somehow manage to find time to fuck, your MP-35 damn well better have a fine view.

"You will learn how to use this weapon. It will save your life. The U.S. Marines are fucking chumps, but the one thing they got right was their Marine Rifle Creed. It reads, in part, 'This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine. My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life. My rifle, without me, is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless. I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me. And I will.'

"Ladies and gentlemen, take this creed to heart. This is your rifle. Pick it up and activate it."

I knelt down and removed the rifle from its plastic wrap. Notwithstanding everything Ruiz described about the rifle, the MP-35

did not appear especially impressive. It had heft but was not unwieldy, was well balanced and well sized for maneuverability. On the side of the rifle stock was a sticker. "TO ACTIVATE WITH BRAINPAL: Initialize BrainPal and say *Activate MP-35, serial number ASD-324-DDD-4E3C1*."

"Hey, Asshole," I said. "Activate MP-35, serial number ASD-324-DDD-4E3C1."

MP-35 ASD-324-DDD-4E3C1 is now activated for CDF Recruit John Perry, Asshole responded. Please load ammunition now. A small graphic display hovered in the corner of my field of vision, showing me how to load my rifle. I reached back down and picked up the rectangular block that was my ammunition—and nearly lost my balance trying to pick it up. It was impressively heavy; they weren't kidding about the "high density" part. I jammed it into my rifle where instructed. As I did so, the graphic showing me how to load my rifle disappeared and a counter sprang up in its place, which read:

Firing Options Available
Note: Using One Type of Round Decreases Availability of Other Types
Rifle Rounds: 200
Shot Rounds: 80
Grenade Rounds: 40
Missile Rounds: 35
Fire Rounds: 10 Minutes
Microwave: 10 Minutes
Rifle Rounds Currently Selected.

"Select shot rounds," I said.

Shot rounds selected, Asshole replied.

"Select missile rounds," I said.

Missile rounds selected, Asshole replied. Please select target. Suddenly every member of the platoon had a tight green targeting outline; glancing directly at one would cause an overlay to flash. What

the hell, I thought, and selected one, a recruit in Martin's squad named Toshima.

Target selected. Asshole confirmed. You may fire, cancel, or select a second target.

"Whoa," I said, canceled the target, and stared down at my MP-35. I turned to Alan, who was holding his weapon next to me. "I'm scared of my weapon," I said.

"No shit," Alan said. "I just nearly blew you up two seconds ago with a grenade."

My response to this shocking admission was cut short when, on the other side of the platoon, Ruiz suddenly wheeled into a recruit's face. "What did you just say, recruit?" Ruiz demanded. Everybody fell silent as we turned to see who had incurred Ruiz's wrath.

The recruit was Sam McCain; in one of our lunch sessions I recalled Sarah O'Connell describing him as more mouth than brain. Unsurprisingly, he'd been in sales most of his life. Even with Ruiz hovering a millimeter from his nose, McCain projected smarminess; a mildly surprised smarminess, but smarminess all the same. He clearly didn't know what got Ruiz so worked up, but whatever it was, he expected to walk away from this encounter unscathed.

"I was just admiring my weapon, Master Sergeant," McCain said, holding up his rifle. "And I was telling recruit Flores here how it almost made me feel sorry for the poor bastards we're going up against out—"

The rest of McCain's comment was lost to time when Ruiz grabbed McCain's rifle from the surprised recruit and with one supremely relaxed spin clocked McCain in the temple with the flat side of the rifle butt. McCain crumpled like laundry; Ruiz calmly extended a leg and jammed a boot into McCain's throat. Then he flipped the rifle around; McCain stared up, horrified, into the barrel of his own rifle.

"Not so smug now, are you, you little shit?" Ruiz said. "Imagine I'm your enemy. Do you almost feel sorry for me now? I just disarmed you in less time than it takes to fucking *breathe*. Out there, those *poor bastards* move faster than you would ever believe. They are going to spread your fucking liver on crackers and eat it up while you're still trying to get them in your sights. So don't you ever feel *almost sorry* for

the poor bastards. They don't need your pity. Are you going to remember this, recruit?"

"Yes, Master Sergeant!" McCain rasped, over the boot. He was very nearly sobbing.

"Let's make sure," Ruiz said, pressed the barrel into the space between McCain's eyes, and pulled the trigger with a dry *click*. Every member of the platoon flinched; McCain wet himself.

"Dumb," Ruiz said after McCain realized he wasn't, in fact, dead. "You weren't listening earlier. The MP-35 can only be fired by its owner while it's on base. That's *you,* asshole." He straightened up and contemptuously flung the rifle at McCain, then turned to face the platoon at large.

"You recruits are even stupider than I have imagined," Ruiz declared. "Listen to me now: There has *never* been a military in the entire history of the human race that has gone to war equipped with more than the *least* that it needs to fight its enemy. War is expensive. It costs money and it costs lives and no civilization has an infinite amount of either. So when you fight, you conserve. You use and equip only as much as you have to, never more.

He stared at us grimly. "Is *any* of this getting through? Do any of you *understand* what I'm trying to tell you? You don't have these shiny new bodies and pretty new weapons because we want to give you an unfair advantage. You have these bodies and weapons because they are the *absolute minimum* that will allow you to fight and survive out there. We didn't *want* to give you these bodies, you dipshits. It's just that if we didn't, the human race would already be *extinct*.

"Do you understand now? Do you *finally* have an idea of what you're up against? Do you?"

But it wasn't all fresh air, exercise, and learning to kill for humanity. Sometimes, we took classes.

"During your physical training, you've been learning to overcome your assumptions and inhibitions regarding your new body's abilities," Lieutenant Oglethorpe said to a lecture hall filled with training battalions 60th through 63rd. "Now we need to do this with your

mind. It's time to flush out some deeply held preconceptions and prejudices, some of which you probably aren't even aware you have."

Lieutenant Oglethorpe pressed a button on the podium where he stood. Behind him, two display boards shimmered to life. In the one to the audience's left a nightmare popped up—something black and gnarled, with serrated lobster claws that nestled pornographically inside an orifice so dank you could very nearly smell the stench. Above the shapeless pile of a body, three eyestalks or antennae or whatever perched. Ochre dripped from them. H. P. Lovecraft would have run screaming.

To the right was a vaguely deerlike creature with cunning, almost human hands, and a quizzical face that seemed to speak of peace and wisdom. If you couldn't pet this guy, you could at least learn something about the nature of the universe from him.

Lieutenant Oglethorpe took a pointer and waved it in the direction of the nightmare. "This guy is a member of the Bathunga race. The Bathunga are a deeply pacifistic people; they have a culture that reaches back hundreds of thousands of years, and features an understanding of mathematics that makes our own look like simple addition. They live in the oceans, filtering plankton, and enthusiastically coexist with humans on several worlds. These are good guys, and this guy"—he tapped the board—"is unusually handsome for his species."

He whacked the second board, which held the friendly deer man. "Now, this little fucker is a Salong. Our first official encounter with the Salong happened after we tracked down a rogue colony of humans. People aren't supposed to freelance colonize, and the reason why becomes pretty obvious here. The colonists landed on a planet that was also a colonization target for the Salong; somewhere along the way the Salong decided that humans were good eatin', so they attacked the humans and set up a human meat farm. All the adult human males but a handful were killed, and those that were kept were 'milked' for their sperm. The women were artificially inseminated and their newborns taken, penned and fattened like veal.

"It was years before we found the place. When we did so, the CDF troops razed the Salong colony to the ground and barbecued the Salong

colony leader in a cookout. Needless to say we've been fighting the baby-eating sons of bitches ever since.

"You can see where I'm going with this," Oglethorpe said. "Assuming you know the good guys from the bad guys will get you killed. You can't afford anthropomorphic biases when some of the aliens most like us would rather make human hamburgers than peace."

Another time Oglethorpe asked us to guess what the one advantage was that Earth-based soldiers had over CDF soldiers. "It's certainly not physical conditioning or weaponry," he said, "since we're clearly ahead on both those counts. No, the advantage soldiers have on Earth is that they know who their opponents are going to be, and also, within a certain range, how the battle will be conducted—with what sort of troops, types of weapons, and range of goals. Because of this, battle experience in one war or engagement can be directly applicable to another, even if the causes for the war or the goals for the battle are entirely different.

"The CDF has no such advantage. For example, take a recent battle with the Efg." Oglethorpe tapped on one of the displays to reveal a whalelike creature with massive side tentacles that branched into rudimentary hands. "The guys are up to forty meters long and have a technology that allows them to polymerize water. We'd lose water ships when the water around them turned into a quicksand-like sludge that pulled them down, taking their crews with them. How does the experience of fighting one of these guys translate into experience that can be applied to, say, the Finwe,"—the other screen flipped on, revealing a reptilian charmer—"who are small desert dwellers who prefer long-distance biological attacks?

"The answer is that it really can't. And yet CDF soldiers go from one sort of battle to the other all the time. This is one reason why the mortality rate in the CDF is so high—every battle is new, and every combat situation, in the experience of the individual soldier at least, is unique. If there's one thing you bring out of these little chats of ours, it's this: Any ideas you have about how war is waged had better be thrown out the window. Your training here will open your eyes to some of what you'll encounter out there, but remember that as infantry, you'll often be the first point of contact with new hostile

races, whose methods and motives are unknown and sometimes unknowable. You have to think fast, and not assume what's worked before will work now. That's a quick way to be dead."

One time, a recruit asked Oglethorpe why CDF soldiers should even care about the colonists or the colonies. "We're having it drilled into our heads that we're not even really human anymore," she said. "And if that's the case, why should we feel any attachment to the colonists? They're only human, after all. Why not breed CDF soldiers as the next step in human evolution and give ourselves a leg up?"

"Don't think you're the first one to ask that question," Oglethorpe said, and this got a general chuckle. "The short answer is that we can't. All the genetic and mechanical fiddling that gets done to CDF soldiers renders them genetically sterile. Because of common genetic material used in the template of each of you, there are far too many lethal recessives to allow any fertilization process to get very far. And there's too much nonhuman material to allow successful crossbreeding with normal humans. CDF soldiers are an amazing bit of engineering, but as an evolutionary path, they're a dead end. This is one reason why none of you should be too smug. You can run a mile in three minutes, but you can't make a baby.

"In a larger sense, however, there's no need. The next step of evolution is already happening. Just like the Earth, most of the colonies are isolated from each other. Nearly all people born on a colony stay there their entire lives. Humans also adapt to their new homes; it's already beginning culturally. Some of the oldest of the colony planets are beginning to show linguistic and cultural drift from their cultures and languages back on Earth. In ten thousand years there will be genetic drift as well. Given enough time, there will be as many different human species as there are colony planets. Diversity is the key to survival.

"Metaphysically, maybe you should feel attached to the colonies because, having been changed yourself, you appreciate the human potential to become something that will survive in the universe. More directly, you should care because the colonies represent the future of the human race, and changed or not, you're still far closer to human than any other intelligent species out there.

"But ultimately, you should care because you're old enough to know that you should. That's one of the reasons the CDF selects old people to become soldiers, you know—it's not just because you're all retired and a drag on the economy. It's also because you've lived long enough to know that there's more to life than your own life. Most of you have raised families and have children and grandchildren and understand the value of doing something beyond your own selfish goals. Even if you never become colonists yourselves, you still recognize that human colonies are good for the human race, and worth fighting for. It's hard to drill that concept into the brain of a nineteen-year-old. But you know from experience. In this universe, experience counts."

We drilled. We shot. We learned. We kept going. We didn't sleep much.

In week six, I replaced Sarah O'Connell as squad leader. E squad consistently fell behind in team exercises and that was costing the 63rd Platoon in intra-platoon competitions. Every time a trophy went to another platoon, Ruiz would grind his teeth and take it out on me. Sarah accepted it with good grace. "It's not exactly like herding kindergarteners, unfortunately," is what she had to say. Alan took her place and whipped the squad into shape. Week seven found the 63rd shooting a trophy right out from under the 58th; ironically, it was Sarah, who turned out to be a hell of a shot, who took us over the top.

In week eight, I stopped talking to my BrainPal. Asshole had studied me long enough to understand my brain patterns and began seemingly anticipating my needs. I first noticed it during a simulated live-fire exercise, when my MP-35 switched from rifle rounds to guided missile rounds, tracked, fired and hit two long-range targets, and then switched again to a flamethrower just in time to fry a nasty six-foot bug that popped out of some nearby rocks. When I realized I hadn't vocalized any of the commands, I felt a creepy vibe wash over me. After another few days, I noticed I became annoyed whenever I would actually have to ask Asshole for something. How quickly the creepy becomes commonplace.

In week nine, I, Alan and Martin Garabedian had to provide a little administrative discipline to one of Martin's recruits, who had decided that he wanted Martin's squad leader job and was not above attempting a little sabotage to get it. The recruit had been a moderately famous pop star in his past life and was used to getting his way through whatever means necessary. He was crafty enough to enlist some squadmates into the conspiracy, but unfortunately for him, was not smart enough to realize that as his squad leader, Martin had access to the notes he was passing. Martin came to me; I suggested that there was no reason to involve Ruiz or the other instructors in what could easily be resolved by ourselves.

If anyone noticed a base hovercraft briefly going AWOL later that night, they didn't say anything. Likewise if anyone saw a recruit dangling from it upside down as it passed dangerously close to some trees, the recruit held to the hovercraft only by a pair of hands on each ankle. Certainly no one claimed to hear either the recruit's desperate screaming, or Martin's critical and none-too-favorable examination of the former pop star's most famous album. Master Sergeant Ruiz did note to me at breakfast the next morning that I was looking a little windblown; I replied that it may have been the brisk thirty-klick jog he had us run prior to the meal.

In week eleven, the 63rd and several other platoons dropped into the mountains north of the base. The objective was simple; find and wipe out every other platoon and then have the survivors make it back to base, all within four days. To make things interesting, each recruit was fitted with a device that registered shots taken at them; if one connected, the recruit would feel paralyzing pain and then collapse (and then be retrieved, eventually, by drill instructors watching nearby). I knew this because I had been the test case back on base, when Ruiz wanted to show an example. I stressed to my platoon that they did *not* want to feel what I felt.

The first attack came almost as soon as we hit the ground. Four of my recruits went down before I spotted the shooters and called them to the attention of the platoon. We got two; two got away. Sporadic attacks over the next few hours made it clear that most of the other

platoons had broken into squads of three or four and were hunting for other squads.

I had another idea. Our BrainPals made it possible for us to maintain constant, silent contact with each other regardless of whether we were standing close to one another or not. Other platoons seemed to be missing the implications of this fact, but that was too bad for them. I had every member of the platoon open a secure BrainPal communication line with every other member, and then I had each platoon member head off individually, charting terrain and noting the location of enemy squads they spotted. This way, we would all have an ever-widening map of the ground and the positions of the enemy. Even if one of our recruits got picked off, the information they provided would help another platoon member avenge his or her death (or at least keep from getting killed right away). One soldier could move quickly and silently and harass the other platoon's squads, and still work in tandem with other soldiers when the opportunity arose.

It worked. Our recruits took shots when they could, laid low and passed on information when they couldn't, and worked together when opportunities presented themselves. On the second day, I and a recruit named Riley picked off two squads from opposing platoons; they were so busy shooting at each other that they didn't notice Riley and me sniping them from a distance. He got two, I got three and the other three apparently got each other. It was pretty sweet. After we were done, we didn't say anything to each other, just faded back into the forest and kept tracking and sharing terrain information.

Eventually the other platoons figured out what we were doing and tried to do the same, but by that time, there were too many of the 63rd, and not enough of them. We mopped them up, getting the last of them by noon, and then started our jog into base, some eighty klicks away. The last of us made it in by 1800. In the end, we lost nineteen members of the platoon, including the four at the beginning. But we were responsible for just over half of the total kills across seven other platoons, while losing less than a third of our own people. Even Master Sergeant Ruiz couldn't complain about that. When the base commander awarded him the War Games trophy, he even cracked a smile. I can't even imagine how much it hurt him to do that.

"Our luck will never cease," the newly minted Private Alan Rosenthal said as he came up to me at the shuttle boarding area. "You and I got assigned to the same ship."

Indeed we had. A quick jaunt back to Phoenix on the troop ship *Francis Drake,* and then leave until the CDFS *Modesto* came to call. Then we'd hook up with the 2nd Platoon, Company D, of the 233rd CDF Infantry Battalion. One battalion per ship—roughly a thousand soldiers. Easy to get lost. I'd be glad to have Alan with me once again.

I glanced over to Alan and admired his clean, new Colonial blue dress uniform—in no small part because I was wearing one just like it. "Damn, Alan," I said. "We sure look good."

"I've always loved a man in uniform," Alan said to me. "And now that I'm the man in the uniform, I love him even more."

"Uh-oh," I said. "Here comes Master Sergeant Ruiz."

Ruiz had spotted me waiting to board my shuttle; as he approached I put down the duffel bag that contained my everyday uniform and few remaining personal belongings, and presented him with a smart salute.

"At ease, Private," Ruiz said, returning the salute. "Where are you headed?"

"The *Modesto,* Master Sergeant," I said. "Private Rosenthal and I both."

"You're shitting me," Ruiz declared. "The 233rd? Which company?"

"D, Master Sergeant. Second Platoon."

"Out-fucking-standing, Private," Ruiz said. "You will have the pleasure in serving in the platoon of Lieutenant Arthur Keyes, if that dumb son of a bitch hasn't managed to have his ass chewed on by now by some alien or another. When you see him, extend to him my compliments, if you would. You may additionally tell him that Master Sergeant Antonio Ruiz has declared that you are not nearly the dipshit that most of your fellow recruits have turned out to be."

"Thank you, Master Sergeant."

"Don't let it go to your head, Private. You are still a dipshit. Just not a very big one."

"Of course, Master Sergeant."

"Good. And now, if you will excuse me. Sometimes you just gotta hit the road." Master Sergeant Ruiz saluted. Alan and I saluted back. Ruiz glanced at us both, offered a tight, tight smile, and then walked away without looking back.

"That man scares the shit out of me," Alan said.

"I don't know. I kind of like him."

"Of course you do. He thinks you're almost not a dipshit. That's a compliment in his world."

"Don't think I don't know it," I said. "Now all I have to do is live up to it."

"You'll manage," Alan said. "After all, you *do* still get to be a dipshit."

"That's comforting," I said. "At least I'll have company."

Alan grinned. The shuttle doors opened. We grabbed our stuff and went inside.

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NINE

"I can take a shot," Watson said, sighting over his boulder. "Let me drill one of those things."

"No," said Viveros, our corporal. "Their shield is still up. You'd just be wasting ammo."

"This is bullshit," Watson said. "We've been here for hours. We're sitting here. They're sitting there. When their shield goes down, we're supposed to do what, walk over and start blasting at them? This isn't the fucking fourteenth century. We shouldn't make an *appointment* to start killing the other guy."

Viveros looked irritated. "Watson, you're not paid to think. So shut the fuck up and get ready. It's not going to be long now, anyway. There's only one thing left in their ritual before we get at it."

"Yeah? What's that?" Watson said.

"They're going to sing," Viveros said.

Watson smirked. "What are they going to sing? Show tunes?"

"No," Viveros said. "They're going to sing our deaths."

As if on cue, the massive, hemispherical shield enclosing the Consu encampment shimmered at the base. I adjusted my eyesight and focused down the several hundred meters across the field as a single Consu stepped through, the shield lightly sticking to its massive carapace until it moved far enough away for the electrostatic filaments to collapse back into the shield.

He was the third and final Consu who would emerge out of the shield before the battle. The first had appeared nearly twelve hours ago;

a low-ranking grunt whose bellowing challenge served to formally signal the Consu's intent to battle. The low rank of the messenger was meant to convey the minimal regard in which our troops were held by the Consu, the idea being that if we had been really important, they would have sent a higher-up. None of our troops took offense; the messenger was always of low rank, regardless of opponent, and anyway, unless you are extraordinarily sensitive to Consu pheromones, they pretty much all look alike.

The second Consu emerged from behind the shield several hours later, bellowed like a herd of cows caught in a thresher, and then promptly exploded, pinkish blood and bits of his organs and carapace momentarily splashing against the Consu shield and sizzling lightly as they drizzled down to the ground. Apparently the Consu believed that if a single soldier was ritually prepared beforehand, its soul can be persuaded to reconnoiter the enemy for a set amount of time before moving on to wherever it is Consu souls go. Or something along that line. This is a signal honor, not lightly given. This seemed to me to be a fine way to lose your best soldiers in a hurry, but given that I was one of the enemy, it was hard to see the downside for us in the practice.

This third Consu was a member of the highest caste, and his role was simply to tell us the reasons for our death and the manner by which we would all die. After which point, we could actually get to the killing and dying. Any attempt to hasten things along by preemptively taking a shot at the shield would be useless; short of dropping it into a stellar core, there was very little that could ding a Consu shield. Killing a messenger would accomplish nothing other than causing the opening rituals to be restarted, delaying the fighting and killing even more.

Besides, the Consu weren't *hiding* behind the shield. They just had a lot of prebattle rituals to take care of, and they preferred that they were not interrupted by the inconvenient appearance of bullets, particle beams or explosives. Truth was, there was nothing the Consu liked better than a good fight. They thought nothing of the idea of tromping off to some planet, setting themselves down, and daring the natives to pry them off in battle.

Which was the case here. The Consu were entirely disinterested in colonizing this planet. They had merely blasted a human colony here

into bits as a way of letting the CDF know they were in the neighborhood and looking for some action. Ignoring the Consu wasn't a possibility, as they'd simply keep killing off colonists until someone came to fight them on a formal basis. You never knew what they'd consider enough for a formal challenge, either. You just kept adding troops until a Consu messenger came out and announced the battle.

Aside from their impressive, impenetrable shields, the Consu's battle technology was of a similar level as the CDF's. This was not as encouraging as you might think, as what reports filtered back from Consu battles with other species indicated that the Consu's weaponry and technology were always more or less matched with that of their opponent. This added to the idea that what the Consu were engaging in was not war but sports. Not unlike a football game, except with slaughtered colonists in the place of proper spectators.

Striking first against Consu was not an option. Their entire inner home system was shielded. The energy to generate the shield came from the white dwarf companion of the Consu sun. It had been completely encased with some sort of harvesting mechanism, so that all the energy coming off it would fuel the shield. Realistically speaking, you just don't fuck with people who can do that. But the Consu had a weird honor system; clean them off a planet in battle, and they didn't come back. It was like the battle was the vaccination, and we were the antiviral.

All of this information was provided by our mission database, which our commanding officer Lieutenant Keyes had directed us to access and read before the battle. The fact that Watson didn't seem to know any of this meant he hadn't accessed the report. This was not entirely surprising, since from the first moment I met Watson it was clear that he was the sort of cocky, willfully ignorant son of a bitch who would get himself or his squadmates killed. My problem was I was his squadmate.

The Consu unfolded its slashing arms—specialized at some point in their evolution to deal with some unimaginably horrifying creature on their homeworld, most likely—and underneath, its more recognizably armlike forelimbs raised to the sky. "It's starting," Viveros said.

"I could pop him so easy," Watson said.

"Do it and I'll shoot you myself," Viveros said.

The sky cracked with a sound like God's own rifle shot, followed by what sounded like a chain saw ripping through a tin roof. The Consu was singing. I accessed Asshole and had it translate from the beginning.

Behold, honored adversaries,
We are the instruments of your joyful death.
In our ways we have blessed you
The spirit of the best among us has sanctified our battle.
We will praise you as we move among you
And sing your souls, saved, to their rewards.
It is not your fortune to have been born among The People
So we set you upon the path that leads to redemption.
Be brave and fight with fierceness
That you may come into our fold at your rebirth.
This blessed battle hallows the ground
And all who die and are born here henceforth are delivered.

"Damn, that's loud," Watson said, sticking a finger in his left ear and twisting. I doubted he had bothered to get a translation.

"This isn't a war or a football game, for Christ's sake," I said to Viveros. "This is a baptism."

Viveros shrugged. "CDF doesn't think so. This is how they start every battle. They think it's their equivalent of the National Anthem. It's just ritual. Look, the shield's coming down." She motioned toward the shield, which was now flickering and failing across its entire length.

"About fucking time," Watson said. "I was about to take a nap."

"Listen to me, both of you," Viveros said. "Stay calm, stay focused and keep your ass down. We've got a good position here, and the lieutenant wants us to snipe these bastards as they come down. Nothing flashy—just shoot them in the thorax. That's where their brains are. Every one we get means one less for the rest of them to worry about. Rifle shots only, anything else is just going to give us

away faster. Cut the chatter, BrainPals only from here on out. You get me?"

"We get you," I said.

"Fucking A," Watson said.

"Excellent," Viveros said. The shield finally failed, and the field separating human and Consu was instantly streaked with the trails of rockets that had been sighted and readied for hours. The concussive burps of their explosions were immediately followed by human screams and the metallic chirps of Consu. For a few seconds there was nothing but smoke and silence; then a long, serrated cry as the Consu surged forward to engage the humans, who in turn kept their positions and tried to cut down as many Consu as they could before their two fronts collided.

"Let's get to it," Viveros said. And with that she raised her Empee, sighted it on some far-distant Consu, and began to fire. We quickly followed.

How to prepare for battle.

First, systems check your MP-35 Infantry Rifle. This is the easy part; MP-35s are self-monitoring and self-repairing, and can, in a pinch, use material from an ammunition block as raw material to fix a malfunction. Just about the only way you can permanently ruin an Empee is to place it in the path of a firing maneuvering thruster. Inasmuch as you're likely to be attached to your weapon at the time, if this is the case, you have other problems to worry about.

Second, put on your war suit. This is the standard self-sealing body-length unitard that covers everything but the face. The unitard is designed to let you forget about your body for the length of the battle. The "fabric" of organized nanobots lets in light for photosynthesis and regulates heat; stand on an arctic floe or a Saharan sand dune and the only difference your body notes is the visual change in scenery. If you somehow manage to sweat, your unitard wicks it away, filters it and stores the water until you can transfer it to a canteen. You can deal with urine this way, too. Defecating in your unitard is generally not recommended.

Get a bullet in your gut (or anywhere else), and the unitard stiffens at the point of impact and transfers the energy across the surface of the suit, rather than allowing the bullet to burrow through. This is massively painful but better than letting a bullet ricochet merrily through your intestines. This only works up to a point, alas, so avoiding enemy fire is still the order of the day.

Add your belt, which includes your combat knife, your multipurpose tool, which is what a Swiss army knife wants to be when it grows up, an impressively collapsible personal shelter, your canteen, a week's worth of energy wafers and three slots for ammo blocks. Smear your face with a nanobot-laden cream that interfaces with your unitard to share environmental information. Switch on your camouflage. Try to find yourself in the mirror.

Third, open a BrainPal channel to the rest of your squad and leave it open until you return to the ship or you die. I thought I was pretty smart to think of this in boot camp, but it turns out to be one of the holiest of unofficial rules during the heat of battle. BrainPal communication means no unclear commands or signals—and no speaking to give away your position. If you hear a CDF soldier during the heat of battle, it's because he is either stupid or screaming because he's been shot.

The only drawback to BrainPal communication is that your BrainPal can also send emotional information if you're not paying attention. This can be distracting if you suddenly feel like you're going to piss yourself in fright, only to realize it's not you who's about to cut loose on the bladder, but your squadmate. It's also something none of your squadmates will ever let you live down.

Link *only* to your squadmates—try to keep a channel open to your entire platoon and suddenly sixty people are cursing, fighting and dying inside your head. You do not need this.

Finally, forget everything except to follow orders, kill anything that's not human and stay alive. The CDF makes it simple to do this; for the first two years of service, every soldier is infantry, no matter if you were a janitor or surgeon, senator or street bum in your previous life. If you make it through the first two years, then you get the chance to specialize, to earn a permanent Colonial billet instead of wandering

from battle to battle, and to fill in the niche and support roles every military body has. But for two years, all you have to do is go where they tell you, stay behind your rifle, and kill and not be killed. It's simple, but simple isn't the same as easy.

• • •

It took two shots to bring down a Consu soldier. This was new—none of the intelligence on them mentioned personal shielding. But something was allowing them to take the first hit; it sprawled them on whatever you might consider to be their ass, but they were up again in a matter of seconds. So two shots; one to take them down, and one to keep them down.

Two shots in sequence on the same moving target is not easily accomplished when you're firing across a few hundred meters of very busy battleground. After figuring this one out, I had Asshole create a specialized firing routine that shot two bullets on one trigger pull, the first a hollow tip, and the second with an explosive charge. The specification was relayed to my Empee between shots; one second I was squeezing off single standard-issue rifle ammo, the next I was shooting my Consu killer special.

I loved my rifle.

I forwarded the firing specification to Watson and Viveros; Viveros forwarded it up the chain of command. Within about a minute, the battlefield was peppered with the sound of rapid double shots, followed by dozens of Consu puffing out as the explosive charges strained their internal organs against the insides of their carapaces. It sounded like popcorn popping. I glanced over at Viveros. She was emotionlessly sighting and shooting. Watson was firing and grinning like a boy who just won a stuffed animal at the state farm BB shoot.

Uh oh—sent Viveros. *We're spotted get down*—

"What?" Watson said, and poked his head up. I grabbed him and pulled him down as the rockets slammed into the boulders we'd been using for cover. We were pelted with newly formed gravel. I looked up just in time to see a chunk of boulder the size of a bowling ball twirling madly down toward my skull. I swatted at it without thinking; the suit went hard down the length of my arm and the chunk flew off like a

lazy softball. My arm ached; in my other life I'd be the proud owner of three new, short, likely terribly misaligned arm bones. I wouldn't be doing that again.

"Holy shit, that was close," said Watson.

"Shut up," I said, and sent to Viveros. *What now?—*

*Hold tight—*she sent and took her multipurpose tool off her belt. She ordered it into a mirror, then used it to peek over the edge of her boulder. *Six no seven on their way up—*

There was a sudden *krump* close by. *Make that five—*she corrected, and closed up her tool. *Set for grenades then follow up then we move—*

I nodded, Watson grinned, and when Viveros sent *Go—*we all pumped grenades over the boulders. I counted three each; after nine explosions I exhaled, prayed, popped up and saw the remains of one Consu, another dragging itself dazedly away from our position, and two scrambling for cover. Viveros got the wounded one; Watson and I each plugged one of the other two.

"Welcome to the party, you shitheads!" Watson whooped, and then bobbled up exultantly over his boulder just in time to get it in the face from the fifth Consu, who had gotten ahead of the grenades and had stayed low while we mopped up its friends. The Consu leveled a barrel at Watson's nose and fired; Watson's face cratered inward and then outward as a geyser of SmartBlood and tissue that used to be Watson's head sprayed over the Consu. Watson's unitard, designed to stiffen when hit by projectiles, did just that when the shot hit the back of his hood, pressuring the shot, the SmartBlood, and bits of skull, brain and BrainPal back out the only readily available opening.

Watson didn't know what hit him. The last thing he sent through his BrainPal channel was a wash of emotion that could best be described as disoriented puzzlement, the mild surprise of someone who knows he's seeing something he wasn't expecting but hasn't figured out what it is. Then his connection was cut off, like a data feed suddenly unexpectedly shut down.

The Consu who shot Watson sang as it blew his face apart. I had left my translation circuit on, and so I saw Watson's death subtitled, the word "Redeemed" repeated over and over while bits of his head formed weeping droplets on the Consu's thorax. I screamed and fired. The

Consu slammed backward and then its body exploded as bullet after bullet dug under its thoracic plate and detonated. I figured I wasted thirty rounds on an already dead Consu before I stopped.

"Perry," Viveros said, switching back to her voice to snap me out of whatever I was in. "More on the way. Time to move. Let's go."

"What about Watson?" I asked.

"Leave him," Viveros said. "He's dead and you're not and there's no one to mourn him out here anyway. We'll come for the body later. Let's go. Let's stay alive."

We won. The double-bullet rifle technique thinned out the Consu herd by a substantial amount before they got wise and moved to switch tactics, falling back to launch rocket attacks rather than to make another frontal assault. After several hours of this the Consu fell back completely and fired up their shield, leaving behind a squad to ritually commit suicide, signaling the Consu's acceptance of their loss. After they had plunged their ceremonial knives into their brain cavity, all that was left was to collect our dead and what wounded had been left in the field.

For the day, 2nd Platoon came through pretty well; two dead, including Watson, and four wounded, only one seriously. She'd be spending the next month growing back her lower intestine, while the other three would be up and back on duty in a matter of days. All things considered, things could have been worse. A Consu armored hovercraft had rammed its way toward 4th Platoon, Company C's position and detonated, taking sixteen of them with it, including the platoon commander and two squad leaders, and wounding much of the rest of the platoon. If 4th Platoon's lieutenant weren't already dead, I'd suspect he'd be wishing he were after a clusterfuck like that.

After we received an all clear from Lieutenant Keyes, I went back to get Watson. A group of eight-legged scavengers was already at him; I shot one and that encouraged the rest to disperse. They had made impressive progress on him in a short amount of time; I was sort of darkly surprised at how much less someone weighed after you subtracted his head and much of his soft tissues. I put what was left of

him in a fireman's carry and started on the couple of klicks to the temporary morgue. I had to stop and vomit only once.

Alan spied me on the way in. "Need any help?" he said, coming up alongside me.

"I'm fine," I said. "He's not very heavy anymore."

"Who is it?" Alan said.

"Watson," I said.

"Oh, *him,*" Alan said, and grimaced. "Well, I'm sure someone somewhere will miss him."

"Try not to get all weepy on me," I said. "How did you do today?"

"Not bad," Alan said. "I kept my head down most of the time, poked my rifle up every now and then and shot a few rounds in the general direction of the enemy. I may have hit something. I don't know."

"Did you listen to the death chant before the battle?"

"Of course I did," Alan said. "It sounded like two freight trains mating. It's not something you can choose *not* to hear."

"No," I said. "I mean, did you get a translation? Did you listen to what it was saying?"

"Yeah," Alan said. "I'm not sure I like their plan for converting us to their religion, seeing as it involves dying and all."

"The CDF seems to think it's just ritual. Like it's a prayer they recite because it's something they've always done," I said.

"What do you think?" Alan asked.

I jerked my head back to indicate Watson. "The Consu who killed him was screaming, 'Redeemed, redeemed,' as loud as he could, and I'm sure he'd have done the same while he was gutting me. I'm thinking the CDF is underestimating what's going on here. I think the reason the Consu don't come back after one of these battles isn't because they think they've lost. I don't think this battle is really about winning or losing. By their lights, this planet is now consecrated by blood. I think they think they *own* it now."

"Then why don't they occupy it?"

"Maybe it's not time," I said. "Maybe they have to wait until some sort of Armageddon. But my point is, I don't think the CDF knows

whether the Consu consider this their property now or not. I think somewhere down the line, they're going to be mightily surprised."

"Okay, I'll buy that," Alan said. "Every military I've ever heard of has a history of smugness. But what do you propose to do about it?"

"Shit, Alan, I haven't the slightest idea," I said. "Other than to try to be long dead when it happens."

"On an entirely different, less depressing subject," Alan said, "good job thinking up the firing solution for the battle. Some of us were really getting pissed off that we'd shoot those bastards and they'd just get up and keep coming. You're going to get your drinks bought for you for the next couple of weeks."

"We don't pay for drinks," I said. "This is an all-expenses-paid tour of hell, if you'll recall."

"Well, if we did, you would," Alan said.

"I'm sure it's not that big of a deal," I said, and then noticed that Alan had stopped and was standing at attention. I looked up and saw Viveros, Lieutenant Keyes, and some officer I didn't recognize striding toward me. I stopped and waited for them to reach me.

"Perry," Lieutenant Keyes said.

"Lieutenant," I said. "Please forgive the lack of salute, sir. I'm carrying a dead body to the morgue."

"That's where they go," Keyes said, and motioned at the corpse. "Who is that?"

"Watson, sir."

"Oh, *him,*" Keyes said. "That didn't take very long, did it."

"He was excitable, sir," I said.

"I suppose he was," Keyes said. "Well, anyway. Perry, this is Lieutenant Colonel Rybicki, the 233rd's commander."

"Sir," I said. "Sorry about not saluting."

"Yes, dead body, I know," said Rybicki. "Son, I just wanted to congratulate you on your firing solution today. You saved a lot of time and lives. Those Consu bastards keep switching things up on us. Those personal shields were a new touch and they were giving us a hell of a lot of trouble there. I'm putting you in for a commendation, Private. What do you think about that?"

"Thank you, sir," I said. "But I'm sure someone else would have figured it out eventually."

"Probably, but you figured it out first, and that counts for something."

"Yes, sir."

"When we get back to the *Modesto,* I hope you'll let an old infantryman buy you a drink, son."

"I'd like that, sir," I said. I saw Alan smirk in the background.

"Well, then. Congratulations again." Rybicki motioned at Watson. "And sorry about your friend."

"Thank you, sir." Alan saluted for the both of us. Rybicki saluted back, and wheeled off, followed by Keyes. Viveros turned back to me and Alan.

"You seem amused," Viveros said to me.

"I was just thinking that it's been about fifty years since anyone called me 'son,'" I said.

Viveros smiled, and indicated Watson. "You know where you're taking him?" she asked.

"Morgue's just over that ridge," I said. "I'm going to drop off Watson and then I'd like to catch the first transport back to the *Modesto,* if that's okay."

"Shit, Perry," Viveros said. "You're the hero of the day. You can do anything you want." She turned to go.

"Hey, Viveros," I said. "Is it always like this?"

She turned back. "Is what always like this?"

"This," I said. "War. Battles. Fighting."

"What?" Viveros said, and then snorted. "Hell, no, Perry. Today was a cakewalk. This is as easy as it gets." And then she trotted off, highly amused.

That was how my first battle went. My era of war had begun.

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TEN

Maggie was the first of the Old Farts to die.

She died in the upper atmosphere of a colony named Temperance, an irony because like most colonies with a heavy mining industry, it was sprinkled liberally with bars and brothels. Temperance's metal-laden crust had made it a hard colony to get and a difficult one for humans to keep—the permanent CDF presence there was three times the usual Colonial complement, and they were always sending additional troops to back them up. Maggie's ship, the *Dayton,* caught one of these assignments when Ohu forces dropped into Temperance space and salted an army's worth of drone warriors onto the surface of the planet.

Maggie's platoon was supposed to be part of the effort to take back an aluminum mine one hundred klicks out of Murphy, Temperance's main port. They never made it to the ground. On the way down, her troop transport hull was struck by an Ohu missile. It tore open the hull and sucked several soldiers into space, including Maggie. Most of these soldiers died instantly from the force of the impact or by chunks of the hull tearing into their bodies.

Maggie wasn't one of them. She was sucked out into the space above Temperance fully conscious, her combat unitard automatically closing around her face to keep the air from vomiting out of her lungs. Maggie immediately messaged to her squad and platoon leader. What was left of her squad leader was flapping about in his descent harness. Her platoon leader wasn't much more help, but he wasn't to blame.

The troopship was not equipped for space rescue and was in any event gravely damaged and limping, under fire, toward the closest CDF ship to discharge its surviving passengers.

A message to the *Dayton* itself was likewise fruitless; the *Dayton* was exchanging fire with several Ohu ships and could not dispatch rescue. Nor could any other ship. In nonbattle situations she was already too small a target, too far down Temperance's gravity well and too close to Temperance's atmosphere for anything but the most heroic retrieval attempts. In a pitched battle situation, she was already dead.

And so Maggie, whose SmartBlood was by now reaching its oxygen-carrying limit and whose body was undoubtedly beginning to scream for oxygen, took her Empee, aimed it at the nearest Ohu ship, computed a trajectory, and unloaded rocket after rocket. Each rocket burst provided an equal and opposite burst of thrust to Maggie, speeding her toward Temperance's darkened, nighttime sky. Battle data would later show that her rockets, propellant long spent, did indeed impact against the Ohu ship, dealing some minor damage.

Then Maggie turned, faced the planet that would kill her, and like the good professor of Eastern religions that she used to be, she composed *jisei,* the death poem, in the haiku form.

Do not mourn me, friends
I fall as a shooting star
Into the next life

She sent it and the last moments of her life to the rest of us, and then she died, hurtling brightly across the Temperance night sky.

She was my friend. Briefly, she was my lover. She was braver than I ever would have been in the moment of death. And I bet she was a hell of a shooting star.

"The problem with the Colonial Defense Forces is not that they aren't an excellent fighting force. It's that they're far too easy to use."

Thus spoke Thaddeus Bender, two-time Democratic senator from Massachusetts; former ambassador (at various times) to France, Japan and the United Nations; Secretary of State in the otherwise disastrous Crowe administration; author, lecturer, and finally, the latest addition to Platoon D. Since the latest of these had the most relevance to the rest of us, we had all decided that Private Senator Ambassador Secretary Bender was well and truly full of crap.

It's amazing how quickly one goes from being fresh meat to being an old hand. On our first arrival to the *Modesto,* Alan and I received our billets, were greeted cordially if perfunctorily by Lieutenant Keyes (who raised an eyebrow when we passed along Sergeant Ruiz's compliments), and were treated with benign neglect by the rest of the platoon. Our squad leaders addressed us when we needed to be addressed, and our squadmates passed on information we needed to know. Otherwise, we were out of the loop.

It wasn't personal. The three other new guys, Watson, Gaiman and McKean, all got the same treatment, which centered on two facts. The first was that when new guys come in, it was because some old guy has gone—and typically "gone" meant "dead." Institutionally, soldiers can be replaced like cogs. On the platoon and squad level, however, you're replacing a friend, a squadmate, someone who had fought and won and died. The idea that you, whoever you are, could be a replacement or a substitute for that dead friend and teammate is mildly offensive to those who knew him or her.

Secondly, of course, you simply haven't fought yet. And until you do, you're not one of them. You can't be. It's not your fault, and in any event, it will be quickly corrected. But until you're in the field, you're just some guy taking up space where a better man or woman used to be.

I noticed the difference immediately after our battle with the Consu. I was greeted by name, invited to share mess-hall tables, asked to play pool or dragged into conversations. Viveros, my squad leader, started asking my opinion about things instead of telling me how things would be. Lieutenant Keyes told me a story about Sergeant Ruiz, involving a hovercraft and a Colonial's daughter, that I simply did not believe. In short, I'd become one of them—one of *us*. The Consu firing solution and the subsequent commendation helped, but Alan, Gaiman

and McKean were also welcomed into the fold, and they didn't do anything but fight and not get killed. It was enough.

Now, three months in, we'd had a few more rounds of fresh meat come through the platoon, and seen them replace people we'd befriended—we knew how the platoon felt when we came to take someone else's place. We had the same reaction: Until you fight, you're just taking up space. Most fresh meat clued in, understood, and toughed out the first few days until we saw some action.

Private Senator Ambassador Secretary Bender, however, was having none of this. From the moment he showed up, he had been ingratiating himself to the platoon, visiting each member personally and attempting to establish a deep, personal relationship. It was annoying. "It's like he's campaigning for something," Alan complained, and this was not far off. A lifetime of running for office will do that to you. You just don't know when to shut it off.

Private Senator Ambassador Secretary Bender also had a lifetime of assuming people were passionately interested in what it was he had to say, which is why he wouldn't ever shut up, even when no one appeared to be listening. So when he was opining wildly on the CDF's problems in mess hall, he was essentially talking to himself. Be that as it may, his statement was provocative enough to get a rise out of Viveros, with whom I was lunching.

"Excuse me?" she said. "Would you mind repeating that last bit?"

"I said, I think the problem with the CDF is not that it's not a good fighting force, but that it's too easy to use," Bender repeated.

"Really," Viveros said. "This I have to hear."

"It's simple, really," Bender said, and shifted into a position that I immediately recognized from pictures of him back on Earth—hands out and slightly curved inward, as if to grasp the concept he was illuminating, in order to give it to others. Now that I was on the receiving end of the movement, I realized how condescending it was. "There's no doubt the Colonial Defense Forces are an extremely capable fighting force. But in a very real sense, that's not the issue. The issue is—what are we doing to *avoid* its use? Are there times when the CDF has been deployed where intensive diplomatic efforts might not have yielded better results?"

"You must have missed the speech I got," I said. "You know, the one about it not being a perfect universe and competition for real estate in the universe being fast and furious."

"Oh, I *heard* it," Bender said. "I just don't know that I *believe* it. There are how many stars in this galaxy? A hundred billion or so? Most of which have a system of planets of some sort. The real estate is functionally infinite. No, I think the real issue here may be that the *reason* we use force when we deal with other intelligent alien species is that force is the easiest thing to use. It's fast, it's straightforward, and compared to the complexities of diplomacy, it's simple. You either hold a piece of land or you don't. As opposed to diplomacy, which is intellectually a much more difficult enterprise."

Viveros glanced over to me, and then back to Bender. "You think what we're doing is *simple*?"

"No, no." Bender smiled and held up a hand placatingly. "I said simple *relative* to diplomacy. If I give you a gun and tell you to take a hill from its inhabitants, the situation is relatively simple. But if I tell you to go to the inhabitants and negotiate a settlement that allows you to acquire that hill, there's a lot going on—what do you do with the current inhabitants, how are they compensated, what rights do they continue to have regarding the hill, and so on."

"Assuming the hill people don't just shoot you as you drop by, diplomatic pouch in hand," I said.

Bender smiled at me and pointed vigorously. "See, that's *exactly* it. We assume that our opposite numbers have the same warlike perspective as we do. But what if—*what if*—the door was opened to diplomacy, even just a crack? Would not any intelligent, sentient species choose to walk through that door? Let's take, for example, the Whaid people. We're about to war on them, aren't we?"

Indeed we were. The Whaidians and humans had been circling each other for more than a decade, fighting over the Earnhardt system, which featured three planets habitable to both our people. Systems with multiple inhabitable planets were fairly rare. The Whaidians were tenacious but also relatively weak; their network of planets was small and most of their industry was still concentrated on their home world. Since the Whaid would not take the hint and stay out of the Earnhardt

system, the plan was to skip to Whaid space, smash their spaceport and major industrial zones, and set their expansionary capabilities back a couple of decades or so. The 233rd would be part of the task force that was set to land in their capital city and tear the place up a bit; we were to avoid killing civilians when we could, but otherwise knock a few holes in their parliament houses and religious gathering centers and so on. There was no industrial advantage to doing this, but it sends the message that we can mess with them anytime, just because we feel like it. It shakes them up.

"What about them?" Viveros asked.

"Well, I've done a little research into these people," Bender said. "They've got a remarkable culture, you know. Their highest art form is a form of mass chant that's like a Gregorian round—they'll get an entire city full of Whaidians and start chanting. It's said you can hear the chant for dozens of klicks, and the chants can go on for hours."

"So?"

"*So,* this is a culture we should be celebrating and exploring, not bottling up on its planet simply because they're in our way. Have the Colonials even attempted to reach a peace with these people? I see no record of an attempt. I think we should *make* an attempt. Maybe an attempt could be made by *us*."

Viveros snorted. "Negotiating a treaty is a little beyond our orders, Bender."

"In my first term as senator, I went to Northern Ireland as part of a trade junket and ended up extracting a peace treaty from the Catholics and the Protestants. I didn't have the authority to make an agreement, and it caused a huge controversy back in the States. But when an opportunity for peace arises, we must take it," Bender said.

"I remember that," I said. "That was right before the bloodiest marching season in two centuries. Not a very successful peace agreement."

"That wasn't the fault of the *agreement,*" Bender said, somewhat defensively. "Some drugged-out Catholic kid threw a grenade into an Orangemen's march, and it was all over after that."

"Damn real live people, getting in the way of your peaceful ideals," I said.

"Look, I already said diplomacy wasn't easy," Bender said. "But I think that ultimately we have more to gain by trying to work with these people than we have by trying to wipe them out. It's an option that should at least be on the table."

"Thanks for the seminar, Bender," Viveros said. "Now if you'll yield the floor, I have two points to make here. The first is that until you fight, what you know or what you think you know out here means shit to me and to everyone else. This isn't Northern Ireland, it's not Washington, DC, and it's not planet Earth. When you joined up, you joined up as a soldier, and you better remember that. Second, no matter what you think, *Private,* your responsibility right now isn't to the universe or to humanity at large—it's to me, your squadmates, your platoon and to the CDF. When you're given an order, you'll follow it. If you go beyond the scope of your orders, you're going to have to answer to me. Do you get me?"

Bender regarded Viveros somewhat coolly. "Much evil has been done under the guise of 'just following orders,'" he said. "I hope we never have to find ourselves using the same excuse."

Viveros narrowed her eyes. "I'm done eating," she said, and got up, taking her tray with her.

Bender arched his eyebrows as she left. "I didn't mean to offend her," he said to me.

I regarded Bender carefully. "Do you recognize the name 'Viveros' at all, Bender?" I asked.

He frowned a bit. "It's not familiar," he said.

"Think way back," I said. "We would have been about five or six or so."

A light went on in his head. "There was a Peruvian president named Viveros. He was assassinated, I think."

"Pedro Viveros, that's right," I said. "And not just him—his wife, his brother, his brother's wife and most of their families were murdered in the military coup. Only one of Pedro's daughters survived. Her nanny stuffed her down a laundry chute while the soldiers went through the presidential palace, looking for family members. The nanny was raped before they slit her throat, incidentally."

Bender turned a greenish shade of gray. "She can't be the daughter," he said.

"She is," I said. "And you know what, when the coup was put down and the soldiers who killed her family were put on trial, their excuse was that they were just following orders. So regardless of whether your *point* there was well made or not, you made it to just about the last person in the universe to whom you ought to lecture on the banality of evil. She knows *all* about it. It slaughtered her family while she lay in a basement laundry cart, bleeding and trying not to cry."

"God, I'm sorry, of course," Bender said. "I wouldn't have said anything. But I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't, Bender," I said. "And that was Viveros' point. Out here, you *don't* know. You don't know anything."

"Listen up," Viveros said on the way down to the surface. "Our job is strictly to smash and dash. We're landing near the center of their government operations—blast buildings and structures but avoid shooting live targets unless CDF soldiers are targeted first. We've already kicked these people in the balls, now we're just pissing on them while they're down. Be fast, do damage and get back. Are we clear?"

The operation had been a cakewalk up to that point; the Whaidians had been utterly unprepared for the sudden and instantaneous arrival of two dozen CDF battleships in their home space. The CDF had opened up a diversionary offensive in the Earnhardt system several days before to lure Whaidian ships there to support the battle, so there was almost nobody to defend the home fort, and those that were, were blasted out of the sky in short, surprised order.

Our destroyers also made quick work of the Whaidians' major spaceport, shattering the kilometers-long structure at critical junctures, which allowed the port's own centripetal forces to tear it apart (no need to waste more ammo than necessary). No skip pods were detected as launched to alert Whaidian forces in the Earnhardt system to our attack, so they wouldn't know they were duped until it was too late. If any of the Whaidian forces survived the battle there, they would return

home to find nowhere to dock or repair. Our forces would be long gone when they arrived.

With the local space cleared of threats, the CDF leisurely targeted industrial centers, military bases, mines, refineries, desalination plants, dams, solar arrays, harbors, space launch facilities, major highways and any other target that would require the Whaidians to rebuild it before rebuilding their interstellar capabilities. After six hours of solid, unremitting pummeling, the Whaidians had been effectively pushed back to the days of internal combustion engines, and would be likely to stay there for a while.

The CDF avoided a wide-scale random bombing of major cities, since wanton civilian death was not the goal. CDF intelligence suspected major casualties downstream of the destroyed dams, but that really couldn't be helped. There would have been no way for the Whaidians to stop the CDF from cratering the major cities, but the thinking was the Whaidians would have enough problems with the disease, famine and the political and social unrest that inevitably comes as a result of having your industrial and technological base yanked out from under you. Therefore, actively going after the civilian population was seen as inhumane and (equally as important to the CDF brass) an inefficient use of resources. Aside from the capital city, which was targeted strictly as an exercise in psychological warfare, no ground attacks were even considered.

Not that the Whaidians in the capital seemed to appreciate that. Projectiles and beams were bouncing off our troop transports even as we landed. It sounded like hail and frying eggs on the hull.

"Two by two," Viveros said, pairing up the squad. "No one goes off on their own. Refer to your maps and don't get trapped. Perry, you got Bender watch. Try to keep him from signing any peace treaties, if you please. And as an added bonus, you two are first out the door. Get high and deal with snipers."

"Bender." I motioned him over. "Set your Empee for rockets and follow me. Camo on. BrainPal chatter only." The transport ramp went down and Bender and I sprinted out the door. Directly in front of me at forty meters was an abstract sculpture of some description; I nailed it as Bender and I ran. Never much liked abstract art.

I was heading for a large building northwest of our landing position; behind the glass in its lobby I could see several Whaidians with long objects in their paws. I launched a couple of missiles in their direction. The missiles would impact on the glass; they probably wouldn't kill the Whaidians inside, but they'd distract them long enough for Bender and I to disappear. I messaged Bender to blow out a window on the building's second floor; he did, and we launched ourselves at it, landing in what looked like a suite of office cubicles. Hey, even aliens have got to work. No live Whaidians to speak of, however. I imagine most of them had stayed home from work that day. Well, who could blame them.

Bender and I found a rampway that spiraled upward. No Whaidians followed us up from the lobby. I suspected they were so busy with other CDF soldiers that they forgot all about us. The rampway terminated at the roof; I stopped Bender just before we rose into view and crept up slowly to see three Whaidians sniping down the side of the building. I plugged two and Bender got the other one.

What now—sent Bender.

Come with me—I sent.

Your average Whaidian looks rather like a cross between a black bear and a large, angry flying squirrel; the Whaidians we shot looked like large angry flying bear-squirrels with rifles and the backs of their heads blown out. We crab-walked as quickly as possible to the edge of the roof. I motioned to Bender to go to one of the dead snipers; I took the one next to him.

Get under it—I sent.

What?—Bender sent back.

I motioned to other roofs. *Other Whaidians on other roofs*—I sent. *Camouflage while I take them out*—

What do I do?—Bender sent.

Watch the roof entrance and don't let them do to us what we did to them—I sent.

Bender grimaced and got under his dead Whaidian. I did the same and immediately regretted it. I don't know what a live Whaidian smells like but a dead one smells positively fucking rank. Bender shifted and

aimed at the door; I sent to Viveros, gave her an overhead view through the BrainPal, and then started doing damage to other rooftop snipers.

I got six on four different roofs before they began to figure out what was going on. Finally I saw one train its weapon onto my roof; I gave it a love tap in the brain with my rifle and sent to Bender to ditch his corpse and clear the roof. We made it off a few seconds before the rockets hit.

On the way down we ran into the Whaidians I was expecting on our way up. The question of who was more surprised, us or them, was answered when Bender and I opened fire first and wheeled back to the closest building level. I pumped a few grenades down the ramp to give the Whaidians something to think about while Bender and I ran.

"What the hell do we do now?" Bender yelled at me as we ran through the building level.

BrainPal, you asshole—I sent, and turned a corner. *You'll give us away*—I went to a glass wall and looked out. We were at least thirty meters up, too far to jump even with our enhanced bodies.

Here they come—Bender sent. From behind us came the sound of what I suspected were some very angry Whaidians.

Hide—I sent to Bender, trained my Empee at the glass wall closest to me, and fired. The glass shattered but didn't break. I grabbed what I would guess was a Whaidian chair and threw it out the window. Then I ducked into the cubicle next to Bender.

What the hell—Bender sent. *Now they're coming right for us—*

Wait—I sent. *Stay down. Be ready to fire when I tell you. Automatic —*

Four Whaidians turned the corner and carefully made their way toward the shattered wall pane. I heard them gargling to each other; I turned on the translation circuit.

"—went out the hole in the wall," one was saying to another as they approached the wall.

"Impossible," another said. "It is too far down. They would die."

"I have seen them leap great distances," the first said. "Perhaps they would survive."

"Even those [untranslatable] cannot fall 130 deg [unit of measurement] and live," said the third, coming up on the first two.

"Those [untranslatable] eaters of [untranslatable] are still here somewhere."

"Did you see [untranslatable—probability personal name] on the ramp? Those [untranslatable] tore [it] apart with their grenades," said the fourth.

"We came up the same ramp as you," said the third. "Of course we saw [it]. Now quiet yourselves and search this area. If they are here, we will exact revenge on the [untranslatable] and celebrate it in service." The fourth closed the gap between him and the third Whaidian, and reached out a great paw to it, as if in commiseration. All four were now conveniently standing in front of the gaping hole in the wall.

Now—I sent to Bender and opened fire. The Whaidians jerked like marionettes for a few seconds and then fell as the force of the bullet impacts pushed them back into the wall that wasn't there anymore. Bender and I waited a few seconds, then snuck back to the ramp. It was unoccupied except for the remains of [untranslatable—probability personal name], which smelled even worse than his dead sniper compatriots up on the roof. So far, the entire experience of the Whaid homeworld had been a real nasal treat, I had to say. We headed back down to the second floor and headed out the same way we had come in, passing by the four Whaidians whom we had helped out the window.

"This isn't really what I expected," Bender said, gawking at the remains of the Whaidians as he passed.

"What did you expect?" I asked.

"I don't rightly know," he replied.

"Well, then, how can it not be what you expected," I said, and switched my BrainPal to speak to Viveros. *We're down*—I sent.

Come over here—Viveros sent and sent her location information. *And bring Bender. You're not going to believe this*—And as she said it, I heard it over the random fire and grenade booms: a low, guttural chant, echoing through the buildings of the government center.

• • •

"This is what I told you about," Bender declared, almost joyously, as we cleared the final corner and began our descent into the natural

amphitheater. In it, hundreds of Whaidians had assembled, chanting and swaying and waving clubs. Around it, dozens of CDF troops had staked out positions. If they opened fire, it would be a turkey shoot. I switched on my translation circuit again but came up with nothing; either the chants meant nothing or they were using a dialect of Whaidian speech that Colonial linguists hadn't figured out.

I spotted Viveros and went to her. "What's going on?" I shouted to her, over the din.

"You tell me, Perry," she shouted back. "I'm just a spectator here." She nodded over to her left, where Lieutenant Keyes was conferring with other officers. "They're trying to figure out what we should do."

"Why hasn't anyone fired?" Bender asked.

"Because they haven't fired on us," Viveros said. "Our orders were not to fire on civilians unless necessary. They appear to be civilians. They're all carrying clubs but they haven't threatened us with them; they just wave them around while they chant. Therefore, it's not necessary to kill them. I'd think you'd be happy with that, Bender."

"I *am* happy about that," Bender said, and pointed, clearly entranced. "Look, the one that's leading the congregation. He's the Feuy, a religious leader. He's a Whaidian of great stature. He probably wrote the chant they're singing right now. Does anyone have a translation?"

"No," Viveros said. "They're not using a language we know. We have no idea what they're saying."

Bender stepped forward. "It's a prayer for peace," he said. "It has to be. They must know what we've done to their planet. They can see what we're doing to their city. Any people to whom this has been done must be crying for it to cease."

"Oh, you are so full of shit," Viveros snapped. "You have no fucking clue what they're chanting about. They could be chanting about how they're going to rip off our heads and piss down our necks. They could be chanting for their dead. They could be singing their goddamn grocery list. *We* don't know. *You* don't know."

"You're wrong," Bender said. "For five decades I was on the front lines of the battle for peace on Earth. I *know* when a people are ready for peace. I know when they're reaching out." He pointed to the

chanting Whaidians. “These people are ready, Viveros. I can *feel* it. And I’m going to prove it to you.” Bender set down his Empee and started toward the amphitheater.

“God damn it, Bender!” Viveros yelled. “Get back here now! That’s an order!”

“I’m not ‘just following orders’ anymore, Corporal!” Bender yelled back, and then started to sprint.

“Shit!” Viveros screamed, and started after him. I grabbed for her and missed.

By now Lieutenant Keyes and the other officers looked up and saw Bender racing toward the Whaidians, Viveros chasing behind. I saw Keyes yell something and Viveros pull up suddenly; Keyes must have sent his order over the BrainPal as well. If he had ordered Bender to stop, Bender ignored the command and continued his race to the Whaidians.

Bender finally stopped at the lip of the amphitheater, and stood there silently. Eventually the Feuy, the one leading the chant, noticed the sole human standing at the edge of his congregation and stopped his chanting. The congregation, confused, lost the chant and spent a minute or so muttering before noticing Bender as well, and turned to face him.

This was the moment Bender was waiting for. Bender must have spent the few moments while the Whaidians noticed his presence composing what he was going to say and translating it into Whaidian, because when he spoke, he attempted their language, and by all professional accounts, did a reasonable job of it.

“My friends, my fellow searchers for peace,” he began, reaching out to them with his hands curved in.

Data culled from the event would eventually show that no fewer than forty thousand tiny needlelike projectiles that Whaidians call *avdgur* struck Bender’s body in the space of less than one second, shot from clubs that were not clubs at all, but traditional projectile weapons in the shape of a tree branch sacred to the Whaidian people. Bender literally melted as each *avdgur* sliver penetrated his unitard and his body, slicing away at the solidity of his form. Everyone agreed later that it was one of the most interesting deaths any of us had ever seen in person.

Bender's body fell apart in a misty splash and the CDF soldiers opened fire into the amphitheater. It was indeed a turkey shoot; not a single Whaidian made it out of the amphitheater or managed to kill or wound another CDF soldier other than Bender. It was over in less than a minute.

Viveros waited for the cease-fire order, walked over to the puddle that was what was left of Bender, and started stamping in it furiously. "How do you like your peace now, motherfucker?" she cried as Bender's liquefied organs stained the lower half of her legs.

"Bender was right, you know," Viveros said to me on the way back to the *Modesto*.

"About what?" I asked.

"About the CDF being used too fast and too much," Viveros said. "About it being easier to fight than to negotiate." She waved in the general direction of the Whaidian home planet, which was receding behind us. "We didn't *have* to do this, you know. Knock these poor sons of bitches out of space and make it so they spend the next couple of decades starving and dying and killing each other. We didn't murder civilians today—well, other than the ones that got Bender. But they'll spend a nice long time dying from disease and murdering each other because they can't do much of anything else. It's no less of a genocide. We just feel better about it because we'll be gone when it happens."

"You never agreed with Bender before," I said.

"That's not true," Viveros said. "I said that he didn't know shit, and that his duty was to us. But I didn't say he was wrong. He should have listened to me. If he'd have followed his fucking orders, he'd be alive now. Instead I'm scraping him off the bottom of my foot."

"He'd probably say he died for what he believed in," I said.

Viveros snorted. "Please," she said. "Bender died for Bender. Shit. Walking up to a bunch of people whose planet we just destroyed and acting like he was their *friend*. What an asshole. If I were one of them, I'd have shot him, too."

"Damn real live people, getting in the way of peaceful ideals," I said.

Viveros smiled. “If Bender were *really* interested in peace instead of his own ego, he’d have done what I’m doing, and what you should do, Perry,” she said. “Follow orders. Stay alive. Make it through our term of infantry service. Join officer training and work our way up. Become the people who are giving the orders, not just following them. That’s how we’ll make peace when we can. And that’s how I can live with ‘just following orders.’ Because I know that one day, I’ll make those orders change.” She leaned back, closed her eyes and slept the rest of the way back to our ship.

Luisa Viveros died two months later on a shithole ball of mud called Deep Water. Our squad walked into a trap set in the natural catacombs below the Hann’i colony that we’d been ordered to clear out. In battle we’d been herded into a cave chamber that had four additional tunnels feeding into it, all ringed with Hann’i infantry. Viveros ordered us back into our tunnel and began firing at its mouth, collapsing the tunnel and sealing it off from the chamber. BrainPal data shows she then turned and began taking out the Hann’i. She didn’t last long. The rest of the squad fought our way back to the surface; not an easy thing to do, considering how we’d been herded in the first place, but better than dying in an ambush.

Viveros got a medal posthumously for bravery; I was promoted to corporal and given the squad. Viveros’ cot and locker were given to a new guy named Whitford, who was decent enough, as far as it went.

The institution had replaced a cog. And I missed her.

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ELEVEN

Thomas died because of something he ate.

What he ingested was so new the CDF didn't have a name for it yet, on a colony so new it also didn't have a name, merely an official designation: Colony 622, 47 Ursae Majoris. (The CDF continued to use Earth-based stellar designations for the same reason they continued to use a twenty-four-hour clock and a 365-day year: Because it was easiest to do it that way.) As a matter of standard operating procedure, new colonies transmit a daily compilation of all colony data into a skip drone, which then skips back to Phoenix so that the Colonial government can keep tabs on colony matters.

Colony 622 had sent drones since its landing six months earlier; aside from the usual arguments, snafus and scuffles that accompany any new colony founding, nothing of any note was reported, except for the fact that a local slime mold was gunking up damn near everything, popping up in machinery, computers, animal pens and even colony living quarters. A genetic analysis of the material was sent back to Phoenix with the request that someone create a fungicide that would get the mold literally out of the colonist's hair. Blank skip drones started arriving immediately after that, with no information uploaded from the colony.

Thomas and Susan were stationed on the *Tucson,* which was dispatched to investigate. The *Tucson* attempted to raise the colony from orbit; no luck. Visual targeting of the colony buildings showed no movement between buildings—no people, no animals, no nothing. The

buildings themselves, however, didn't seem to be damaged. Thomas' platoon got the call for recon.

The colony was covered with goo, a coating of slime mold several centimeters thick in some places. It dripped off power lines and was all over the communication equipment. This was good news—there was now a possibility that the mold had simply overwhelmed the equipment's transmission ability. This momentary burst of optimism was brought to an abrupt halt when Thomas' squad got to the animal pens to find all of the livestock dead and deeply decomposed thanks to the industrious work of the mold. They found the colonists shortly thereafter, in much the same state. Nearly all of them (or what was left of them) were in or near their beds; the exceptions being families, who were often found in children's rooms or the hallways leading to them, and the members of the colony working the graveyard shift, who were found at or near their posts. Whatever hit, hit late and so fast that colonists simply didn't have time to react.

Thomas suggested taking one of the corpses to the colony's medical quarters; he could perform a quick autopsy that might give some insight into what had killed the colonists. His squad leader gave assent, and Thomas and a squadmate hunkered over one of the more intact bodies. Thomas grabbed under the arms and the squadmate took the legs. Thomas told his squadmate to lift on the count of three; he got to two when the slime mold rose up from the body and slapped him wetly on the face. He gasped in surprise; the slime mold slid into his mouth and down his throat.

The rest of Thomas' squad immediately cued their suits to provide faceplates, and not a moment too soon, since in a matter of seconds, slime mold leaped from every crack and crevice to attack. All over the colony, similar attacks were made nearly simultaneously. Six of Thomas' platoon mates also found themselves with a mouthful of slime mold.

Thomas tried to pull the slime mold out of his mouth, but it slid farther into his throat, blocking his airway, pushing into his lungs and down his esophagus into his stomach. Thomas sent via his BrainPal that his squadmates should take him to the medical quarters, where they might be able to suction enough of the mold out of his body to allow

him to breathe again; the SmartBlood meant they would have almost fifteen minutes before Thomas began to suffer permanent brain damage. It was an excellent idea and probably would have worked, had not the slime mold begun to excrete concentrated digestive acids into Thomas' lungs, eating him from the inside while he was still alive. Thomas' lungs began to dissolve immediately; he was dead from shock and asphyxiation minutes later. The six other platoon mates joined in his fate, the fate that had, everyone later agreed, also befallen the colonists.

Thomas' platoon leader gave orders to leave Thomas and the other victims behind; the platoon retreated to the transport and made its way back to the *Tucson*. The transport was denied permission to dock. The platoon was led in, one by one, in hard vacuum to kill whatever mold was still lingering on their suits, and then subjected to an intense external and internal decontamination process that was every bit as painful as it sounds.

Subsequent unmanned probes showed no survivors of Colony 622 anywhere, and that the slime mold, beyond possessing enough intelligence to mount two separate coordinated attacks, was nearly impervious to traditional weaponry. Bullets, grenades and rockets affected only small portions while leaving other portions unharmed; flamethrowers fried up a top layer of slime mold, leaving layers underneath untouched; beam weaponry slashed through the mold but did minimal overall damage. Research on the fungicide the colonists had requested had begun but was halted when it was determined that the slime mold was present almost everywhere on the planet. The amount of effort to locate another inhabitable planet was deemed less expensive than eradicating the slime mold on a global scale.

Thomas' death was a reminder that not only don't we know what we're up against out here, sometimes we simply can't *imagine* what we're up against. Thomas made the mistake of assuming the enemy would be more like us than not. He was wrong. He died because of it.

Conquering the universe was beginning to get to me.

The unsettled feeling had begun at Gindal, where we ambushed Gindalian soldiers as they returned to their aeries, slashing their huge wings with beams and rockets that sent them tumbling and screeching down sheer two-thousand-meter cliff faces. It had really started to affect me above Udaspri, as we donned inertia-dampening power packs to provide better control as we leaped from rock fragment to rock fragment in Udaspri's rings, playing hide-and-seek with the spiderlike Vindi who had taken to hurling bits of the ring down to the planet below, plotting delicate decaying orbits that aimed the falling debris directly on top of the human colony of Halford. By the time we arrived at Cova Banda, I was ready to snap.

It might have been because of the Covandu themselves, who in many respects were clones of the human race itself: bipedal, mammalian, extraordinarily gifted in artistic matters, particularly poetry and drama, fast breeding and unusually aggressive when it came to the universe and their place in it. Humans and the Covandu frequently found themselves fighting for the same undeveloped real estate. Cova Banda, in fact, had been a human colony before it had been a Covandu one, abandoned after a native virus had caused the settlers to grow unsightly additional limbs and homicidal additional personalities. The virus didn't give the Covandu even a headache; they moved right in. Sixty-three years later, the Colonials finally developed a vaccine and wanted the planet back. Unfortunately, the Covandu, again all too much like humans, weren't very much into the whole sharing thing. So in we went, to do battle against the Covandu.

The tallest of whom is no more than one inch tall.

The Covandu are not so stupid as to launch their tiny little armies against humans sixty or seventy times their size, of course. First they hit us with aircraft, long-range mortars, tanks and other military equipment that might actually do some damage—and did; it's not easy to take out a twenty-centimeter-long aircraft flying at several hundred klicks an hour. But you do what you can to make it difficult to use these options (we did this by landing in Cova Banda's main city's park, so any artillery that missed us hit their own people) and anyway, eventually you'll dispose of most of these annoyances. Our people used more care destroying Covandu forces than they typically might, not

only because they're smaller and require more attention to hit. There's also the matter that no one wants to have been killed by a one-inch opponent.

Eventually, however, you shoot down all the aircraft and take out all the tanks, and then you have to deal with the individual Covandu themselves. So here's how you fight one: You step on him. You just bring your foot down, apply pressure and it's done. As you're doing this, the Covandu is firing his weapon at you and screaming at the top of his tiny little lungs, a squeak that you may just be able to hear. But it's useless. Your suit, designed to apply brakes on a human-scale high-powered projectile, barely registers the bits of matter flung at your toes by a Covandu; you barely register the crunch of the little being you've stomped. You spot another one, you do it again.

We did this for hours as we waded through Cova Banda's main city, stopping every now and then to sight a rocket on a skyscraper five or six meters high and take it down with a single shot. Some of our platoon would spray a shotgun blast into a building instead, letting the individual shot, each big enough to take a Covandu's head clean off, rattle through the building like mad pachinko balls. But mostly, it was about the stomping. Godzilla, the famous Japanese monster, who had been undergoing his umpteenth revival as I left the Earth, would have felt right at home.

I don't remember exactly when it was I began to cry and kick skyscrapers, but I had done it long enough and hard enough that when Alan was finally called over to retrieve me, Asshole was informing me that I had managed to break three toes. Alan walked me back to the city park we'd landed in and had me sit down; as soon as I did, some Covandu emerged from behind a boulder and aimed his weapon at my face. It felt like tiny grains of sand were plunking into my cheek.

"God *damn* it," I said, grabbed the Covandu like a ball bearing, and angrily flung him into a nearby skyscraper. He zoomed off, spinning in a flat arc, decelerated with a tinny *thunk* when he hit the building, and fell the two remaining meters to the ground. Any other Covandu in the area apparently decided against assassination attempts.

I turned to Alan. "Don't you have a squad to pay attention to?" I asked. He'd been promoted after his squad leader had had his face torn

off by an angry Gindalian.

"I could ask you the same question," he said, and then shrugged. "They're fine. They have their orders and there's no real opposition anymore. It's clean and sweep, and Tipton can handle the squad for that. Keyes told me to come hose you down and find out what the hell is wrong with you. So what the hell *is* wrong with you?"

"Christ, Alan," I said. "I've just spent three hours stepping on intelligent beings like they were fucking bugs, that's what's wrong with me. I'm stomping people to death with my fucking *feet*. This"—I swept out an arm—"it's just totally fucking ridiculous, Alan. These people are *one inch tall*. It's like Gulliver beating the shit out of the Lilliputians."

"We don't get to choose our battles, John," Alan said.

"How does this battle make you feel?" I asked.

"It bothers me a little," Alan said. "It's not a stand-up fight at all; we're just blowing these people to hell. On the other hand, the worst casualty I have in my squad is a burst eardrum. That's a miracle for you right there. So overall I feel pretty good about it. And the Covandu aren't entirely helpless. The overall scoreboard between us and them is pretty much tied."

This was surprisingly true. The Covandu's size worked to their advantage in space battles; their ships are hard for ours to track and their tiny fighter craft do little damage individually but an immense amount in aggregate. It was only when it came to ground fights that we had the overwhelming advantage. Cova Banda had a relatively small space fleet protecting it; it was one of the reasons the CDF decided to try to take it back.

"I'm not talking about who's ahead in the overall tally, Alan," I said. "I'm talking about the fact that our opponents are one fucking inch tall. Before this, we were fighting spiders. Before *that,* we were fighting goddamned pterodactyls. It's all messing with my sense of scale. It's messing with my sense of me. I don't feel human anymore, Alan."

"Technically speaking, you're *not* human anymore," Alan said. It was an attempt to lighten my mood.

It didn't work. "Well, then, I don't feel connected with what it *was* to be human anymore," I said. "Our job is to go meet strange new

people and cultures, and kill the sons of bitches as quickly as we possibly can. We know only what we need to know about these people in order to fight with them. They don't exist to be anything other than an enemy, as far as we know. Except for the fact that they're smart about fighting back, we might as well be fighting animals."

"That makes it easier for most of us," Alan said. "If you don't identify with a spider, you don't feel as bad about killing one, even a big, smart one. Maybe especially a big, smart one."

"Maybe that's what's bothering me," I said. "There's no sense of consequence. I just took a living, thinking thing and hurled it into the side of a building. Doing it didn't bother me at all. The fact that it didn't *does* bother me, Alan. There ought to be consequences to our actions. We have to acknowledge at least some of the horror of what we do, whether we're doing it for good reasons or not. I have no horror about what I'm doing. I'm scared of that. I'm scared of what it means. I'm stomping around this city like a goddamned monster. And I'm beginning to think that's exactly what I am. What I've become. I'm a monster. You're a monster. We're *all* fucking inhuman monsters, and we don't see a damned thing wrong with it."

Alan didn't have anything to say to that. So instead we watched our soldiers, stomping Covandu to death, until finally there weren't really any left to stomp.

"So what the hell is wrong with him?" Lieutenant Keyes asked Alan, about me, at the end of our post-battle briefing with the other squad leaders.

"He thinks we're all inhuman monsters," Alan said.

"Oh, *that,*" Lieutenant Keyes said, and turned to me. "How long have you been in, Perry?"

"Almost a year," I said.

Lieutenant Keyes nodded. "You're right on schedule, then, Perry. It takes about a year for most people to figure out they've turned into some soulless killing machine with no conscience or morals. Some sooner, some later. Jensen here"—he indicated one of the other

squadron leaders—"got to about the fifteen-month point before he cracked. Tell him what you did, Jensen."

"I took a shot at Keyes," Ron Jensen said. "Seeing as he was the personification of the evil system that turned me into a killing machine."

"Nearly took off my head, too," Keyes said.

"It was a lucky shot," Jensen allowed.

"Yeah, lucky that you missed. Otherwise I'd be dead and you'd be a brain floating in a tank, going insane from the lack of outside stimuli. Look, Perry, it happens to everyone. You'll shake it off when you realize you're not actually an inhuman monster, you're just trying to wrap your brain around a totally fucked-up situation. For seventy-five years you lead the sort of life where the most exciting thing that happens is you get laid from time to time, and the next thing you know you're trying to blast space octopi with an Empee before they kill you first. Christ. It's the ones that don't eventually lose it that I don't trust."

"Alan hasn't lost it," I said. "And he's been in as long as I have."

"That's true," Keyes said. "What's your answer to that, Rosenthal?"

"I'm a seething cauldron of disconnected rage on the inside, Lieutenant."

"Ah, repression," Keyes said. "Excellent. Try to avoid taking a potshot at me when you finally blow, please."

"I can't promise anything, sir," Alan said.

"You know what worked for me," said Aimee Weber, another squad leader. "I made a list of the things that I missed about Earth. It was sort of depressing, but on the other hand, it reminded me that I wasn't totally out of it. If you miss things, you're still connected."

"So what did you miss?" I asked.

"Shakespeare in the Park, for one," she said. "My last night on Earth, I saw a production of *Macbeth* that was just perfection. God, that was great. And it's not like we're getting any good live theater around these here parts."

"I miss my daughter's chocolate chip cookies," said Jensen.

"You can get chocolate chip cookies on the *Modesto,*" Keyes said. "Damn fine ones."

"They're not as good as my daughter's. The secret is molasses."

"That sounds disgusting," Keyes said. "I hate molasses."

"Good thing I didn't know that when I shot at you," Jensen said. "I wouldn't have missed."

"I miss swimming," said Greg Ridley. "I used to swim in the river next to my property in Tennessee. Cold as hell most of the time, but I liked it that way."

"Roller coasters," said Keyes. "Big ones that made you feel like your intestines would drop out through your shoes."

"Books," said Alan. "A big fat hardcover on a Sunday morning."

"Well, Perry?" Weber said. "Anything you're missing right about now?"

I shrugged. "Only one thing," I said.

"It can't be any stupider than missing roller coasters," Keyes said. "Out with it. That's an order."

"The only thing I really miss is being married," I said. "I miss sitting around with my wife, just talking or reading together or whatever."

This got utter silence. "That's a new one on me," Ridley said.

"Shit, I don't miss that," Jensen said. "The last twenty years of my marriage were nothing to write home about."

I looked around. "Don't any of you have spouses who joined up? Don't you keep in touch with them?"

"My husband signed up before I did," Weber said. "He was already dead by the time I got my first posting."

"My wife is stationed on the *Boise,*" Keyes said. "She drops me a note occasionally. I don't really get the feeling she's missing me terribly. I guess thirty-eight years of me was enough."

"People get out here and they don't really want to be in their old lives anymore," Jensen said. "Sure, we miss the little things—like Aimee says, that's one of the ways you keep yourself from going nuts. But it's like being taken back in time, to just before you made all the choices that gave you the life you had. If you could go back, why would you make the same choices? You already lived that life. My last comment aside, I don't regret the choices I made. But I'm not in a rush to make those same choices again. My wife's out here, sure. But she's

happy to live her new life without me. And, I must say, I'm not in a hurry to sign up on that tour of duty again, either."

"This isn't cheering me up, people," I said.

"What is it about being married you miss?" Alan asked.

"Well, I miss my wife, you know," I said. "But I also miss the feeling of, I don't know, comfort. The sense you're where you're supposed to be, with someone you're supposed to be with. I sure as hell don't feel that out here. We go places that we have to fight for, with people who might be dead the next day or the day after that. No offense."

"None taken," Keyes said.

"There's no stable ground out here," I said. "There's nothing out here I feel really safe about. My marriage had its ups and downs like anyone's, but when it came down to it, I knew it was solid. I miss that sort of security, and that sort of connection with someone. Part of what makes us human is what we mean to other people, and what people mean to us. I miss meaning something to someone, having that part of being human. That's what I miss about marriage."

More silence. "Well, hell, Perry," Ridley finally said. "When you put it that way, I miss being married, too."

Jensen snorted. "I don't. You keep missing being married, Perry. I'll keep missing my daughter's cookies."

"Molasses," Keyes said. "Disgusting."

"Don't start that again, sir," Jensen said. "I may have to go get my Empee."

Susan's death was very nearly the flip side of Thomas'. A drillers' strike on Elysium had severely reduced the amount of petroleum being refined. The *Tucson* was assigned to transport scab drillers and protect them while they got several of the shut-down drilling platforms back online. Susan was on one of the platforms when the striking drillers attacked with improvised artillery; the explosion knocked Susan and two other soldiers off the platform and down several dozen meters to the sea. The other two soldiers were already dead when they hit the water but Susan, severely burned and barely conscious, was still alive.

Susan was fished out of the sea by the striking drillers who had launched the attack; they decided to make an example of her. The Elysium seas feature a large scavenger called a gaper, whose hinged jaw is easily capable of taking up a person in a single swallow. Gapers frequent the drilling platforms because they feed off the trash the platforms shed into the sea. The drillers propped Susan up, slapped her into consciousness, and then reeled off a hurried manifesto in her general direction, relying on her BrainPal connection to carry their words to the CDF. They then found Susan guilty of collaborating with the enemy, sentenced her to death, and pushed her back into the sea directly below the platform's trash chute.

A gaper was not long in coming; one swallow and Susan was in. At this point Susan was still alive and struggling to exit the gaper from the same orifice from which she entered. Before she could manage this, however, one of the striking drillers shot the gaper directly below the dorsal fin, where the animal's brain was located. The gaper was killed instantly and sank, taking Susan with it. Susan was killed, not from being eaten and not even from drowning, but from the pressure of the water as she and the fish that had swallowed her sank into the abyss.

Any celebration by the striking drillers over this blow to the oppressor was short-lived. Fresh forces from the *Tucson* swept through the drillers' camps, rounded up several dozen ringleaders, shot them and fed them all to the gapers. Except for the ones who killed Susan, who were fed to gapers without the intermediary step of being shot first. The strike ended shortly thereafter.

Susan's death was clarifying to me, a reminder that humans can be as inhuman as any alien species. If I had been on the *Tucson,* I could see myself feeding one of the bastards who killed Susan to the gapers, and not feeling in the least bit bad about it. I don't know if this made me better or worse than what I had feared I was becoming when we battled the Covandu. But I no longer worried about it making me any less human than I was before.

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TWELVE

Those of us who were at the Battle for Coral remember where we were when we first heard the planet had been taken. I was listening to Alan explain how the universe I thought I knew was long gone.

"We left it the first time we skipped," he said. "Just went up and out into the universe next door. That's how skipping works."

This got a nice, long mute reaction from me and Ed McGuire, who were sitting with Alan in the battalion's "At Ease" lounge. Finally Ed, who had taken over Aimee Weber's squad, piped up. "I'm not following you, Alan. I thought that the skip drive just took us up past the speed of light or something like that. That's how it works."

"Nope," Alan said. "Einstein's still right—the speed of light is as fast as you can go. Besides which, you wouldn't want to start flying around the universe at any real fraction of the speed of light, anyway. You hit even a little chunk of dirt while you're going a couple hundred thousand klicks a second and you're going to put a pretty good hole in your spaceship. It's just a speedy way to get killed."

Ed blinked and then swept his hand over his head. "Whoosh," he said. "You lost me."

"All right, look," Alan said. "You asked me how the skip drive works. And like I said, it's simple: It takes an object from one universe, like the *Modesto,* and pops it into another universe. The problem is that we refer to it as a 'drive.' It's not really a drive at all, because acceleration is not a factor; the only factor is location within the multiverse."

"Alan," I said. "You're doing another flyby."

"Sorry," Alan said, and looked thoughtful for a second. "How much math do you guys have?" he asked.

"I vaguely recall calculus," I said. Ed McGuire nodded in agreement.

"Oy," Alan said. "Fine. I'm going to use small words here. Please don't be offended."

"We'll try not to," Ed said.

"Okay. First off, the universe you're in—the universe we're in right at this moment—is only one of an infinite number of possible universes whose existence is allowed for within quantum physics. Every time we spot an electron in a particular position, for example, our universe is functionally defined by that electron's position, while in the alternate universe, that electron's position is entirely different. You following me?"

"Not at all," said Ed.

"You nonscientists. Well, just trust me on it, then. The point is: multiple universes. The multiverse. What the skip drive does is open a door to another one of those universes."

"How does it do that?" I asked.

"You don't have the math for me to explain it to you," Alan said.

"So it's magic," I said.

"From your point of view, yes," Alan said. "But it's well allowed in physics."

"I don't get it," Ed said. "We've been through multiple universes then, yet every universe we've been in has been exactly like ours. Every 'alternate universe' I ever read about in science fiction has major differences. That's how you know you're in an alternate universe."

"There's actually an interesting answer to that question," Alan said. "Let us take as a given that moving an object from one universe to another is a fundamentally unlikely event."

"I can accept that," I said.

"In terms of physics, this is allowable, since at its most basic level, this is a quantum physics universe and pretty much anything *can* happen, even if as a practical matter it doesn't. However, all other

things being equal, each universe prefers to keep unlikely events to a bare minimum, especially above the subatomic level."

"How does a universe 'prefer' anything?" Ed asked.

"You don't have the math," Alan said.

"Of course not," Ed said, rolling his eyes.

"But the universe does prefer some things over others. It prefers to move toward a state of entropy, for example. It prefers to have the speed of light as a constant. You can modify or mess with these things to some extent, but they take work. Same thing here. In this case, moving an object from one universe to another is so unlikely that typically the universe to which you move the object is otherwise exactly like the one you left—a conservation of unlikeliness, you might say."

"But how do you explain us moving from one place to another?" I asked. "How do we get from one point in space in one universe, to an entirely different point in space in another?"

"Well, think about it," Alan said. "Moving an entire ship into another universe is the incredibly unlikely part. From the universe's point of view, *where* in that new universe it appears is really very trivial. That's why I said that the word 'drive' is a misnomer. We don't really *go* anywhere. We simply *arrive*."

"And what happens in the universe that you just left?" asked Ed.

"Another version of the *Modesto* from another universe pops right in, with alternate versions of us in it," Alan said. "Probably. There's an infinitesimally small chance against it, but as a general rule, that's what happens."

"So do we ever get to go back?" I asked.

"Back where?" Alan said.

"Back to the universes where we started from," I said.

"No," Alan said. "Well, again, it's theoretically possible you *could,* but it's extremely unlikely. Universes are continually being created from branching possibilities, and the universes we go to are generally created almost instantly before we skip into them—it's one of the reasons why we *can* skip to them, because they are so very close to our own in composition. The longer in time you're separated from a particular universe, the more time it has to become divergent, and the

less likely you are to go back to it. Even going back to a universe you left a second before is phenomenally unlikely. Going back to the one we left over a year ago, when we first skipped to Phoenix from Earth, is really out of the question."

"I'm depressed," Ed said. "I liked my universe."

"Well, get this, Ed," Alan said. "You don't even come from the same original universe as John and I, since you didn't make that first skip when we did. What's more, even the people who *did* make that same first skip with us aren't in the same universe as us now, since they've since skipped into different universes because they're on different ships —any versions of our old friends that we meet up with will be alternate versions. Of course, they will look and act the same, because except for the occasional electron placement here and there, they *are* the same. But our originating universes are completely different."

"So you and I are all that's left of our universe," I said.

"It's a pretty good bet that universe continues to exist," Alan said. "But we are almost certainly the only two people from it in *this* universe."

"I don't know what to think about that," I said.

"Try not to let it worry you too much," Alan said. "From a day-to-day point of view, all this universe hopping doesn't matter. Functionally speaking, everything is pretty much the same no matter what universe you're in."

"So why do we need starships at all?" Ed asked.

"Quite obviously, to get where you're going once you're in your new universe," Alan said.

"No, no," Ed said. "I mean, if you can just pop from one universe to another, why not just do it planet to planet, instead of using spaceships at all? Just skip people directly to a planet surface. It'd save us from getting shot up in space, that's for sure."

"The universe prefers to have skipping done away from large gravity wells, like planets and stars," Alan said. "Particularly when skipping to another universe. You can skip very close *to* a gravity well, which is why we enter new universes near our destinations, but skipping out is much easier the farther away you are from one, which is

why we always travel a bit before we skip. There's actually an exponential relationship that I could show you, but—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I don't have the math," Ed said.

Alan was about to provide a placating response when all of our BrainPals flicked on. The *Modesto* had just received news of the Coral Massacre. And in whatever universe you were in, it was horrifying stuff.

Coral was the fifth planet humans settled, and the first one that was indisputably better acclimated for humans than even Earth itself. It was geologically stable, with weather systems that spread a temperate growing zone across most of its generous landmasses, and laden with native plant and animal species genetically similar enough to Earth's that they fulfilled human nutritional and esthetic needs. Early on, there was talk of naming the colony Eden, but it was suggested that such a name was karmically tantamount to asking for trouble.

Coral was chosen instead, for the corallike creatures that created gloriously diverse island archipelagos and undersea reefs around the planet's equatorial tropical zone. Human expansion on Coral was uncharacteristically kept to a minimum, and those humans who did live there largely chose to live in a simple, almost pre-industrial way. It was one of the few places in the universe where humans attempted to adapt to the existing ecosystem rather than plow it over and introduce, say, corn and cattle. And it worked; the human presence, small and accommodating, dovetailed into Coral's biosphere and thrived in a modest and controlled way.

It was therefore entirely unprepared for the arrival of the Rraey invasion force, which carried in its numbers a one-to-one ratio of soldiers to colonists. The garrison of CDF troops stationed above and on Coral put up a brief but valiant fight before being overwhelmed; the colonists likewise made the Rraey pay for their attack. In short order, however, the colony was laid waste and the surviving colonists literally butchered, as the Rraey had long ago developed a taste for human meat when they could get it.

One of the snippets broadcast to us via BrainPal was a segment of an intercepted food program, in which one of the Rraey's most famous celebrity chefs discussed the best way to carve up a human for multiple food uses, neck bones being particularly prized for soups and consommés. In addition to sickening us, the video was anecdotal proof that the Coral Massacre was planned in enough detail that they brought along even second-rate Rraey celebrities to take part in the festivities. Clearly, the Rraey were planning to stay.

The Rraey wasted no time toward their primary goal for the invasion. After all the colonists had been killed, the Rraey transported down platforms to begin strip-mining Coral's islands. The Rraey had previously tried to negotiate with the Colonial government to mine the islands; corallike reefs had been extensive on the Rraey homeworld until a combination of industrial pollution and commercial mining had destroyed them. The Colonial government refused permission for mining, both because of Coral's colonists' wishes to keep the planet whole, and because the Rraey's anthropophagous tendencies were well known. No one wanted the Rraey overflying the colonies, looking for unsuspecting humans to turn into jerky.

The Colonial government's failing was in not recognizing what a priority the Rraey had made coral mining—beyond its commerce, there was a religious aspect involved that Colonial diplomats grossly misinterpreted—or the lengths that the Rraey were willing to go to undertake the operation. The Rraey and the Colonial government had mixed it up a few times; relations were never good (how comfortable can you really be with a race that sees you as a nutritious part of a complete breakfast). By and large, however, they kept to their knitting and we to ours. It was only now, as the last of the Rraey's native coral reefs choked toward extinction, that the extent of their desire for Coral's resources came to slug us in the face. Coral was theirs, and we'd have to hit them harder than they had hit us to get it back.

"It's pretty fucking grim," Lieutenant Keyes was telling the squad leaders, "and it's going to be grimmer by the time we get there."

We were in the platoon ready room, cups of coffee growing cold as we accessed page upon page of atrocity reports and surveillance information from the Coral system. What skip drones weren't blasted from the sky by the Rraey reported back a continuing stream of inbound Rraey ships, both for battle and for hauling coral. In less than two days after the Coral Massacre, almost a thousand Rraey ships hovered in the space above the planet, waiting to begin their predation in earnest.

"Here's what we know," Keyes said, and popped up a graphic of the Coral system in our BrainPals. "We estimate that the largest portion of Rraey ship activity in the Coral system is commercial and industrial; from what we know of their ship design, about a quarter of the ships, three hundred or so, have military-grade offensive and defensive capabilities, and many of those are troop transports, with minimal shielding and firepower. But the ones that are battleship class are both larger and tougher than our equivalent ships. We also estimate up to one hundred thousand Rraey forces on the surface, and they've begun to entrench for invasion.

"They're expecting us to fight for Coral, but our best intelligence suggests they expect us to launch an attack in four to six days—the amount of time it will take us to maneuver enough of our big ships into skip position. They know CDF prefers to make overwhelming displays of force, and that is going to take us some time."

"So when are we going to attack?" Alan asked.

"About eleven hours from now," Keyes said. We all shifted uncomfortably in our chairs.

"How can that work, sir?" Ron Jensen asked. "The only ships we'll have available are those that are already at skip distance, or those that will be in the next few hours. How many of those can there be?"

"Sixty-two, counting the *Modesto,*" Keyes said, and our BrainPals downloaded the list of available ships. I briefly noted the presence of the *Hampton Roads* in the list; that was the ship to which Harry and Jesse were posted. "Six more ships are increasing speed to reach skip distance, but we can't count on them to be there when we strike."

"Christ, Keyes," said Ed McGuire. "That's five to one on the ships, and two to one on ground forces, assuming we can land them all. I

think I like our tradition of overwhelming force better."

"By the time we have enough big ships in line to slug it out, they'll be ready for us," Keyes said. "We're better off sending in a smaller force while they're unprepared and doing as much damage as possible right now. There will be a larger force in four days: two hundred ships, packing heat. If we do our job right, they'll have short work of whatever remains of the Rraey forces."

Ed snorted. "Not that we'll be around to appreciate it."

Keyes smiled tightly. "Such lack of faith. Look, people, I know this isn't a happy hike on the moon. But we're not going to be stupid about this. We're not going to slug it out toe to toe. We're going to come in with targeted goals. We're going to hit troop transports on the way in to keep them from bringing in additional ground troops. We're going to land troops to disrupt mining operations before they get going and make it hard for the Rraey to target us without hitting their own troops and equipment. We'll hit commercial and industrial craft as opportunities present themselves, and we'll attempt to draw the big guns out of Coral orbit, so when our reinforcements arrive, we'll be in front and behind them."

"I'd like to go back to the part about the ground troops," Alan said. "We're landing troops and then our ships are going to try to draw Rraey ships *away*? Does that mean for us ground troops what I think it does?"

Keyes nodded. "We'll be cut off for at least three or four days."

"Swell," Jensen said.

"It's war, you jackasses," Keyes snapped. "I'm sorry it's not terribly convenient or comfortable for you."

"What happens if the plan doesn't work and our ships are shot out of the sky?" I asked.

"Well, then I suppose we're fucked, Perry," Keyes said. "But let's not go in with that assumption. We're professionals, we have a job to do. This is what we're trained for. The plan has risks, but they're not stupid risks, and if it works, we'll have the planet back and have done serious damage to the Rraey. Let's all go on the assumption we're going to make a difference, what do you say? It's a nutty idea but it just might

work. And if you get behind it, the chances of it working are that much better. All right?"

More shifting in chairs. We weren't entirely convinced, but there was little to be done. We were going in whether we liked it or not.

"Those six ships that might make it to the party," Jensen said, "who are they?"

Keyes took a second to access the information. "The *Little Rock,* the *Mobile,* the *Waco,* the *Muncie,* the *Burlington* and the *Sparrowhawk,"* he said.

"The *Sparrowhawk*?" Jensen said. "No shit."

"What about the *Sparrowhawk*?" I asked. The name was unusual; battalion-strength spaceships were traditionally named after midsize cities.

"Ghost Brigades, Perry," Jensen said. "CDF Special Forces. Industrial-strength motherfuckers."

"I've never heard of them before," I said. Actually I thought I had, at some point, but the when and where escaped me.

"The CDF saves them for special occasions," Jensen said. "They don't play nice with others. It'd be nice to have them there when we got onto the planet, though. Save us the trouble of dying."

"It'd be nice, but it's probably not going to happen," Keyes said. "This is our show, boys and girls. For better or worse."

The *Modesto* skipped into Coral orbital space ten hours later and in its first few seconds of arrival was struck by six missiles fired at close range by a Rraey battle cruiser. The *Modesto*'s aft starboard engine array shattered, sending the ship wildly tumbling ass over head. My squad and Alan's were packed into a transport shuttle when the missiles hit; the force of the blast's sudden inertial shift slammed several of our soldiers into the sides of the transport. In the shuttle bay, loose equipment and material were flung across the bay, striking one of the other transports but missing ours. The shuttles, locked down by electromagnets, thankfully stayed put.

I activated Asshole to check the ship's status. The *Modesto* was severely damaged and active scanning by the Rraey ship indicated it

was lining up for another series of missiles.

"It's time to go," I yelled to Fiona Eaton, our pilot.

"I don't have clearance from Control," she said.

"In about ten seconds we're going to get hit by another volley of missiles," I said. "There's your fucking clearance." Fiona growled.

Alan, who was also plugged into the *Modesto* mainframe, yelled from the back. "Missiles away," he said. "Twenty-six seconds to impact."

"Is that enough time to get out?" I asked Fiona.

"We'll see," she said, and opened a channel to the other shuttles. "This is Fiona Eaton, piloting Transport Six. Be advised I will perform emergency bay door procedure in three seconds. Good luck." She turned to me. "Strap in now," she said, and punched a red button.

The bay doors were outlined with a sharp shock of light; the crack of the doors blasting away was lost in the roar of escaping air as the doors tumbled out. Everything not strapped down launched out the hole; beyond the debris, the star field lurched sickeningly as the *Modesto* spun. Fiona fed thrust to the engines and waited just long enough for the debris to clear the bay door before cutting the electromagnetic tethers and launching the shuttle out the door. Fiona compensated for the *Modesto*'s spin as she exited, but just barely; we scraped the roof going out.

I accessed the launch bay's video feed. Other shuttles were blasting out of the bay doors by twos and threes. Five made it out before the second volley of missiles crashed into the ship, abruptly changing the trajectory of the *Modesto*'s spin and smashing several shuttles already hovering into the shuttle bay floor. At least one exploded; debris struck the camera and knocked it out.

"Cut your BrainPal feed to the *Modesto,*" Fiona said. "They can use it to track us. Tell your squads. Verbally." I did.

Alan came forward. "We've got a couple of minor wounds back there," he said, motioning to our soldiers, "but nothing too serious. What's the plan?"

"I've got us headed toward Coral and I've cut the engines," Fiona said. "They're probably looking for thrust signatures and BrainPal

transmissions to lock missiles on, so as long as we look dead, they might leave us alone long enough for us to get into the atmosphere."

"Might?" Alan said.

"If you've got a better plan, I'm all ears," Fiona said.

"I have no idea what's going on," Alan said, "so I'm happy to go with your plan."

"What the hell happened back there anyway?" Fiona said. "They hit us as we came out of skip drive. There's no way they could have known where we would be."

"Maybe we were just in the wrong place at the wrong time," Alan said.

"I don't think so," I said, and pointed out the window. "Look."

I pointed to a Rraey battle cruiser to port that was sparkling as missiles thrust away from the cruiser. At extreme starboard, a CDF cruiser popped into existence. A few seconds later the missiles connected, hitting the CDF cruiser broadside.

"No fucking way," Fiona said.

"They know exactly where our ships are coming out," Alan said. "It's an ambush."

"How the fuck are they doing that?" Fiona demanded. "What the *fuck* is going on?"

"Alan?" I said. "You're the physicist."

Alan stared at the damaged CDF cruiser, now listing and struck again by another volley. "No ideas, John. This is all new to me."

"This sucks," Fiona said.

"Keep it together," I said. "We're in trouble and losing it is not going to help."

"If you've got a better plan, I'm all ears," Fiona said again.

"Is it okay to access my BrainPal if I'm not trying to reach the *Modesto*?" I asked.

"Sure," Fiona said. "As long as no transmissions leave the shuttle, we're fine."

I accessed Asshole and pulled up a geographic map of Coral. "Well," I said, "I think we can pretty much say the attack on the coral-mining facility is canceled for today. Not enough of us made it off the *Modesto* for a realistic assault, and I don't think all of us are going to

make it to the planet surface in one piece. Not every pilot's going to be as quick on her feet as you are, Fiona."

Fiona nodded, and I could tell she relaxed a little. Praise is always a good thing, especially in a crisis.

"Okay, here's the new plan," I said, and transmitted the map to Fiona and Alan. "Rraey forces are concentrated on the coral reefs and in the Colonial cities, here on this coast. So we go *here*"—I pointed to the big fat middle of Coral's largest continent—"hide in this mountain range and wait for the second wave."

"*If* they come," Alan said. "A skip drone is bound to get back to Phoenix. They'll know that the Rraey know they're coming. If they know that, they might not come at all."

"Oh, they'll come," I said. "They might not come when we want them to, is all. We have to be ready to wait for them. The good news here is Coral is human friendly. We can eat off the land for as long as we need to."

"I'm not in the mood to colonize," Alan said.

"It's not permanent," I said. "And it's better than the alternative."

"Good point," Alan said.

I turned to Fiona. "What do you need to do to get us to where we're going in one piece?"

"A prayer," she said. "We're in good shape now because we look like floating junk, but anything that hits the atmosphere that's larger than a human body is going to be tracked by Rraey forces. As soon as we start maneuvering, they're going to notice us."

"How long can we stay up here?" I asked.

"Not that long," Fiona said. "No food, no water, and even with our new, improved bodies, there's a couple dozen of us in here and we're going to run out of fresh air pretty fast."

"How long after we hit the atmosphere are you going to have to start driving?" I asked.

"Soon," she said. "If we start tumbling, I'll never get control of it again. We'll just fall down until we die."

"Do what you can," I said. She nodded. "All right, Alan," I said. "Time to alert the troops about the change in plan."

"Here we go," Fiona said, and hit the thrusters. The force of the acceleration pinned me back into the copilot's seat. No longer falling to the surface of Coral, we were aiming ourselves directly at it.

"Chop coming," Fiona said as we plunged into the atmosphere. The shuttle rattled like a maraca.

The instrumentation board let out a ping. "Active scanning," I said. "We're being tracked."

"Got it," Fiona said, banking. "We have some high clouds coming up in a few seconds," she said. "They might help to confuse them."

"Do they usually?" I asked.

"No," she said, and flew into them anyway.

We came out several klicks east and were pinged again. "Still tracking," I said. "Aircraft 350 klicks out and closing."

"Going to get as close to the ground as I can before they get on top of us," she said. "We can't outrace them or outshoot them. The best we can hope is to get near the ground and hope some of their missiles hit the treetops and not us."

"That's not very encouraging," I said.

"I'm not in the encouragement business today," Fiona said. "Hold on." We dove sickeningly.

The Rraey aircraft were on us presently. "Missiles," I said. Fiona lurched left and tumbled us toward the ground. One missile over-flew and trailed away; the other slammed into a hilltop as we crested.

"Nice," I said, and then nearly bit off my tongue as a third missile detonated directly behind us, knocking the shuttle out of control. A fourth missile concussed and shrapnel tore into the side of the shuttle; in the roaring of the air I could hear some of my men screaming.

"Going down," Fiona said, and struggled to right the shuttle. She was headed toward a small lake at an incredibly high speed. "We're going to hit the water and crash," she said. "Sorry."

"You did good," I said, and then the nose of the shuttle hit the surface of the lake.

Wrenching, tearing sounds as the nose of the shuttle ripped downward, shearing off the pilot's compartment from the rest of the shuttle. A brief register of my squad and Alan's as their compartment flies spinning away—a still shot with mouths open, screams silent in all

the other noise, the roar as it flies over the shuttle nose that is already fraying apart as it whirls over the water. The tight, impossible spins as the nose sheds metal and instrumentation. The sharp pain of something striking my jaw and taking it away with it. Gurgling as I try to scream, gray SmartBlood flung from the wound by centrifugal force. An unintentional glance at Fiona, whose head and right arm are somewhere behind us.

A *tang* of metal as my seat breaks off from the rest of the pilot's compartment and I am skipping on my back toward an outcropping of rock, my chair lazily spinning me in counterclockwise direction as my chair back bounces, bounces, bounces toward the stone. A quick and dizzying change in momentum as my right leg strikes the outcropping followed by a yellow-white burst of two-hundred-proof pain as the femur snaps like a pretzel stick. My foot swings directly up where my jaw used to be and I become perhaps the first person in the history of man to kick himself in his own uvula. I arc over dry land and come to ground somewhere where branches are still falling because the passenger compartment of the shuttle has just crashed through. One of the branches comes down heavily across my chest and breaks at least three of my ribs. After kicking myself in my own uvula, this is strangely anticlimactic.

I look up (I have no choice) and see Alan above me, hanging upside down, the splintered end of a tree branch supporting his torso by wedging itself into the space where his liver should be. SmartBlood is dripping off his forehead onto my neck. I see his eyes twitch, registering me. Then I get a message on my BrainPal.

You look terrible—he sends.

I can't respond. I can only stare.

I hope I can see the constellations where I'm going—he sends. He sends it again. He sends it again. He doesn't send it after that.

• • •

Chittering. Rough pads gripping my arm. Asshole recognizes the chittering and beams me a translation.

—*This one yet lives.*

—Leave it. It will die soon. And the green ones aren't good eating. They're not ripe yet.

Snorting, which Asshole translates as [laughter].

"Holy fuck, would you look at this," someone says. "This son of a bitch is alive."

Another voice. Familiar. "Let me see."

Silence. The familiar voice again. "Get this log off him. We're taking him back."

"Jesus Christ, boss," the first voice says. "Look at him. You ought to just put a fucking bullet in his brain. It'd be the merciful thing to do."

"We were told to bring back survivors," the familiar voice says. "Guess what, he survived. He's the *only* one that survived."

"If you think this qualifies as surviving."

"Are you done?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Now move the goddamn branch. The Rraey are going to be on our ass real soon."

Opening my eyes is like trying to lift metal doors. What allows me to do it is the blasting pain I feel as the branch is moved off my torso. My eyes fly open and I aspirate in the jawless equivalent of a scream.

"Christ!" the first voice says, and I see it's a man, blond, flinging away the massive branch. "He's awake!"

A warm hand on the side of what's left of my face. "Hey," the familiar voice says. "Hey. You're all right now. It's okay. You're safe now. We're taking you back. It's okay. You're okay."

Her face comes into view. I know the face. I was married to it. Kathy has come for me.

I weep. I know I'm dead. I don't mind.

I begin to slide away. "You ever see this guy before?" I hear the blond guy ask. "Don't be stupid," I hear Kathy say. "Of course not." I'm gone.

Into another universe.

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PART III

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THIRTEEN

"Oh, you're awake," someone said to me as I opened my eyes. "Listen, don't try to speak. You're immersed in solution. You've got a breathing tube in your neck. And you don't have a jaw."

I glanced around. I was floating in a bath of liquid, thick, warm and translucent; beyond the tub I could see objects but couldn't focus on any of them. As promised, a breathing tube snaked from a panel at the side of the bath toward my neck; I tried to follow it all the way to my body, but my field of vision was blocked by an apparatus surrounding the lower half of my head. I tried to touch it, but I couldn't move my arms. That worried me.

"Don't worry about that," the voice said. "We've turned off your ability to move. Once you're out of the tub, we'll switch you back on again. Another couple of days. You still have access to your BrainPal, by the way. If you want to communicate, use that. That's how we're talking to you right now."

Where the fuck am I—I sent. *And what happened to me*—

"You're at the Brenneman Medical Facility, above Phoenix," the voice said. "Best care anywhere. You're in intensive care. I'm Dr. Fiorina, and I've been taking care of you since you got here. As for what happened to you, well, let's see. First off, you're in good shape now. So don't worry. Having said that, you lost your jaw, your tongue, most of your right cheek and ear. Your right leg was snapped off halfway down your femur; your left one suffered multiple fractures and your left foot was missing three toes and the heel—we think those were

gnawed off. The good news there was that your spinal cord was severed below the rib cage, so you probably didn't feel much of that. Speaking of ribs, six were broken, one of which punctured your gallbladder, and you suffered general internal bleeding. Not to mention sepsis and a host of other general and specific infections brought on by having open wounds for days."

I thought I was dead—I sent. *Dying, anyway*—

"Since you're no longer in real danger of dying, I think I can tell that by all rights, you really *should* be dead," Dr. Fiorina said. "If you were an unmodified human, you *would* be dead. Thank your SmartBlood for keeping you alive; it clotted up before you could bleed out and kept your infections in check. It was a close thing, though. If you hadn't been found when you were, you probably would have been dead shortly after that. As it was, when they got you back to the *Sparrowhawk* they shoved you into a stasis tube to get you here. They couldn't do much for you on the ship. You needed specialized care."

I saw my wife—I sent. *She was the one who rescued me*—

"Is your wife a soldier?"

She's been dead for years—

"Oh," said Dr. Fiorina. Then, "Well, you were pretty far gone. Hallucinations aren't that unusual at that point. The bright tunnel and dead relatives and all of that. Listen, Corporal, your body still needs a lot of work, and it's easier for it to get done while you're asleep. There's nothing for you to do in there but float. I'm going to put you into sleep mode again for a while. The next time you wake up, you'll be out of the tub, and enough of your jaw will have grown back for you to have a real conversation. All right?"

What happened to my squad—I sent. *We were in a crash*—

"Sleep now," Dr. Fiorina said. "We can talk more when you're out of the tub."

I started to craft a truly irritated response but was hit by a wave of fatigue. I was out before I could think about how quickly I was going out.

“Hey, look who’s back,” this new voice said. “The man too dumb to die.”

This time I wasn’t floating in a vat of goo. I glanced over and made out where the voice was coming from.

“Harry,” I said, as well as I could through an immobile jaw.

“The same,” he said, bowing slightly

“Sorry I can’t get up,” I mumbled. “I’m a little banged up.”

“‘A little banged up,’ he says,” Harry said, rolling his eyes. “Christ on a pony. There was more of you missing than was there, John. I know. I saw them haul your carcass back up off of Coral. When they said you were still alive my jaw dropped to the floor.”

“Funny,” I said.

“Sorry,” Harry said. “No pun intended. But you were almost unrecognizable, John. A mess of parts. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I prayed you would die. I couldn’t imagine they could piece you back together like this.”

“Glad to disappoint you,” I said.

“Glad to be disappointed,” he said, and then someone else entered the room.

“Jesse,” I said.

Jesse came around the bed and gave me a peck on the cheek. “Welcome back to the land of the living, John,” she said, and then stepped back. “Look at us, together again. The three musketeers.”

“Two and a half musketeers, anyway,” I said.

“Don’t be morbid,” Jesse said. “Dr. Fiorina says you’re going to make a full recovery. Your jaw should be completely grown by tomorrow, and the leg will be another couple days after that. You’ll be skipping around in no time.”

I reached down and felt my right leg. It was all there, or at least felt all there. I pulled back the bedcovers to get a better look, and there it was: my leg. Sort of. Right below the knee, there was a verdant welt. Above the welt my leg looked like my leg; below it, it looked like a prosthesis.

I knew what was going on. One of my squad had her leg blown off in battle and had it re-created in the same way. They attached a nutrient-rich fake limb at the point of amputation, and then injected a

stream of nanobots into the merge area. Using your own DNA as a guide, the nanobots then convert the nutrients and raw materials of the fake limb into flesh and bone, connecting to already-existing muscles, nerves, blood vessels and so on. The ring of nanobots slowly moved down the fake limb until it had been converted into bone and muscle tissue; once they were done, they migrated through the bloodstream to the intestines and you shat them out.

Not very delicate, but a good solution—there was no surgery, no wait to create cloned parts, no clumsy artificial parts attached to your body. And it took only a couple of weeks, depending on the size of your amputation, to get the limb back. It was how they got back my jaw and, presumably, the heels and toes of my left foot, which were now all present and accounted for.

"How long have I been here?" I asked.

"You've been in this room for about a day," Jesse said. "You were in the tub for about a week before that."

"It took us four days to get here, during which time you were in stasis—did you know about that?" Harry asked. I nodded. "And it was a couple of days before they found you on Coral. So you've been out of it more or less for two weeks."

I looked at both of them. "I'm glad to see both of you," I said. "Don't get me wrong. But why are you here? Why aren't you on the *Hampton Roads*?"

"The *Hampton Roads* was destroyed, John," Jesse said. "They hit us right as we were coming in from our skip. Our shuttle barely got out of the bay and damaged its engines on the way out. We were the only ones. We drifted for almost a day and a half before the *Sparrowhawk* found us. Came real close to asphyxiation."

I recalled watching as a Rraey ship slugged a cruiser on its way in; I wondered if it had been the *Hampton Roads*. "What happened to the *Modesto*?" I asked. "Do you know?"

Jesse and Harry looked at each other. "The *Modesto* went down, too," Harry said, finally. "John, they *all* went down. It was a massacre."

"They can't *all* have gone down," I said. "You said you were picked up by the *Sparrowhawk*. And they came to get me, too."

"The *Sparrowhawk* came later, after the first wave," Harry said. "It skipped in far away from the planet. Whatever the Rraey used to detect our ships missed it, although they caught on after the *Sparrowhawk* parked itself above where you went down. That was a close thing."

"How many survivors?" I asked.

"You were the only one off the *Modesto,*" Jesse said.

"Other shuttles got away," I said.

"They were shot down," Jesse said. "The Rraey shot down everything bigger than a bread box. The only reason our shuttle survived was that our engines were already dead. They probably didn't want to waste the missile."

"How many survivors, total?" I said. "It can't just be me and your shuttle."

Jesse and Harry stood mute.

"No fucking *way,*" I said.

"It was an ambush, John," Harry said. "Every ship that skipped in was hit almost as soon as it arrived in Coral space. We don't know how they did it, but they did it, and they followed through by mopping up every shuttle they could find. That's why the *Sparrowhawk* risked us all to find you—because besides us, you're the *only* survivor. Your shuttle is the only one that made it to the planet. They found you by following the shuttle beacon. Your pilot flipped it on before you crashed."

I remembered Fiona. And Alan. "How many were lost?" I asked.

"Sixty-two battalion-strength cruisers with full crews," Jesse said. "Ninety-five thousand people. More or less."

"I feel sick," I said.

"This was what you'd call a good, old-fashioned clusterfuck," Harry said. "There's no doubt about that at all. So that's why we're still here. There's nowhere else for us to go."

"Well, that and they keep interrogating us," Jesse said. "As if we knew anything. We were already in our shuttle when we were hit."

"They've been dying for you to recover enough to talk to," Harry said to me. "You'll be getting a visit from the CDF investigators very soon, I suspect."

"What are they like?" I asked.

"Humorless," Harry said.

"You'll forgive us if we're not in the mood for jokes, Corporal Perry," Lieutenant Colonel Newman said. "When you lose sixty ships and one hundred thousand men, it pretty much leaves you in a serious state of mind."

All I had said was "broken up," when Newman asked how I was doing. I thought a slightly wry recognition of my physical condition was not entirely out of place. I guess I was wrong.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Although I wasn't really joking. As you may know, I left a rather significant portion of my body on Coral."

"How did you get to be on Coral, anyway?" asked Major Javna, who was my other interviewer.

"I seem to remember taking the shuttle," I said, "although the last part I did on my own."

Javna glanced over to Newman, as if to say, *Again with the jokes*. "Corporal, in your report on the incident, you mention you gave your shuttle pilot permission to blow the *Modesto* shuttle bay doors."

"That's right," I said. I had filed the report the night before, shortly after my visit from Harry and Jesse.

"On whose authority did you give that command?"

"On my own," I said. "The *Modesto* was getting hammered with missiles. I figured that a little individual initiative at that point in time would not be such a bad thing."

"Are you aware how many shuttles were launched across the entire fleet at Coral?"

"No," I said. "Although it seems to have been very few."

"Less than a hundred, including the seven from the *Modesto*," Newman said.

"And do you know how many made it to the Coral surface?" Javna said.

"My understanding is that only mine made it that far," I said.

"That's right," Javna said.

"So?" I said.

"So," Newman said, "that seems to have been pretty lucky for you that you ordered the doors blown just in time to get your shuttle out just in time to make it to the surface alive."

I stared blankly at Newman. "Do you *suspect* me of something, sir?" I said.

"You have to admit it's an interesting string of coincidences," Javna said.

"The hell I do," I said. "I gave the order *after* the *Modesto* was hit. My pilot had the training and the presence of mind to get us to Coral and close enough to the ground that I was able to survive. And if you recall, I only barely did so—most of my body was scraped over an area the size of Rhode Island. The only *lucky* thing was that I was found before I died. Everything else was skill or intelligence, either mine or my pilot's. Excuse me if we were trained well, *sir*."

Javna and Newman glanced at each other. "We're only following every line of inquiry," Newman said mildly.

"Christ," I said. "Think about it. If I really planned to betray the CDF and survive it, chances are I'd try to do it in a manner that didn't involve removing my own fucking jaw." I figured that in my condition, I just might be able to snarl at a superior officer and get away with it.

I was right. "Let's move on," Newman said.

"By all means, let's," I said.

"You mentioned you saw a Rraey battle cruiser firing on a CDF cruiser as it skipped into Coral space."

"That's correct," I said.

"Interesting you managed to see that," Javna said.

I sighed. "Are you going to do this all through the interview?" I said. "Things will move along a lot quicker if you're not always trying to get me to admit I'm a spy."

"Corporal, the missile attack," Newman said. "Do you remember whether the missiles were launched before or after the CDF ship skipped into Coral space?"

"My guess is that they were launched just before," I said. "At least it seemed that way to me. They knew when and where that ship was going to pop out."

"How do you think that's possible?" Javna asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I didn't even know how skip drives worked until a day before the attack. Knowing what I know, it doesn't seem like there should be any way to know a ship is coming."

"What do you mean, 'knowing what you know'?" Newman said.

"Alan, another squad leader"—I didn't want to say he was a friend, because I suspected they'd think that was suspicious—"said that skip drives work by transferring a ship into another universe just like the one it left, and that both its appearance and disappearance are phenomenally unlikely. If that's the case, it doesn't seem like you should be able to know when and where a ship will appear. It just does."

"What do you think happened here, then?" asked Javna.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"As you say, there shouldn't be any way to know that a ship is skipping," Javna said. "The only way we can figure this ambush occurred is if someone tipped off the Rraey."

"Back to this," I said. "Look, even if we supposed the existence of a traitor, how did he do it? Even if he somehow managed to get word to the Rraey that a fleet was coming, there's no possible way he could have known where every ship was going to appear in Coral space—the Rraey were waiting for us, remember. They hit us while we were skipping into Coral space."

"So, again," Javna said. "What do you think happened here?"

I shrugged. "Maybe skipping isn't as unlikely as we thought it was," I said.

"Don't get too worked up over the interrogations," Harry said, handing me a cup of fruit juice he'd gotten for me at the medical center's commissary. "They gave us the same 'it's suspicious you survived' bit."

"How did you react?" I asked.

"Hell," Harry said. "I agreed with them. It's *damn* suspicious. Funny thing is, I don't think they liked that response any better. But ultimately, you can't blame them. The colonies have just gotten the rug pulled out from under us. If we don't figure out what happened at Coral, we're in trouble."

"Well, and there's an interesting point," I said. "What do you think happened?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "Maybe skipping isn't as unlikely as we thought." He sipped his own juice.

"Funny, that's what I said."

"Yeah, but I *mean* it," Harry said. "I don't have the theoretical physics background of Alan, God rest his soul, but the entire theoretical model on which we understand skipping has to be wrong somehow. Obviously, the Rraey have some way to predict, with a high degree of accuracy, where our ships are going to skip. How do they do that?"

"I don't think you're supposed to be able to," I said.

"That's exactly right. But they do anyway. So, quite obviously, our model of how skipping works is wrong. Theory gets thrown out the window when observation proves it isn't so. The question now is what is *really* going on."

"Any thoughts on it?" I said.

"A couple, although it's not really my field," Harry said. "I don't really have the math for it."

I laughed. "You know, Alan said something very much like that to me, not too long ago."

Harry smiled, and raised his cup. "To Alan," he said.

"To Alan," I said. "And all our absent friends."

"Amen," Harry said, and we drank.

"Harry, you said you were there when they brought me on board the *Sparrowhawk,*" I said.

"I was," he said. "You were a mess. No offense."

"None taken," I said. "Do you remember anything about the squad that brought me in?"

"A little," Harry said. "But not too much. They kept us isolated away from the rest of the ship for most of the trip. I saw you in the sick bay when they brought you in. They were examining us."

"Was there a woman in my rescue party?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Tall. Brown hair. That's all I remember right off the top of my head. To be honest, I was paying more attention to you than who was bringing you in. I knew you. I didn't know them. Why?"

"Harry, one of the people who rescued me was my wife. I'd swear on it."

"I thought your wife is dead," Harry said.

"My wife *is* dead," I said. "But this was her. It wasn't Kathy as she was back when we were married. She was a CDF soldier, green skin and all."

Harry looked doubtful. "You were probably hallucinating, John."

"Yeah, but if I was hallucinating, why would I hallucinate Kathy as a CDF soldier? Wouldn't I just remember her as she was?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "Hallucinations, by definition, aren't real. It's not as if they follow rules. There's no reason you couldn't have hallucinated your dead wife as CDF."

"Harry, I know I sound a little nuts, but *I saw my wife,*" I said. "I may have been chopped up, but my brain was working fine. I know what I saw."

Harry sat there for a moment. "My squad had a few days on the *Sparrowhawk* to stew, you know," he said. "We were crammed into a rec room with nowhere to go and nothing to do—they wouldn't even allow us access to the ship's entertainment servers. We had to be escorted to the head. So we talked about the crew of the ship, and about the Special Forces soldiers. And here's an interesting thing: None of us knew anyone who had ever entered the Special Forces from the general ranks. By itself, it doesn't mean anything. Most of us are still in our first couple of years of service. But it's interesting."

"Maybe you have to be in the service a long time," I said.

"Maybe," Harry said. "But maybe it's something else. They call them 'Ghost Brigades,' after all." He took another sip of his juice and then set it down on my bedside table. "I think I'm going to go do some digging. If I don't come back, avenge my death."

"I'll do as best as I can under the circumstances," I said.

"Do that," Harry said, grinning. "And see what you can find out, too. You have at least another couple of interrogation sessions coming up. Try a little interrogating of your own."

"What about the *Sparrowhawk*?" Major Javna said at our next interview session.

"I'd like to send a message to it," I said. "I want to thank them for saving my life."

"It's not necessary," Lieutenant Colonel Newman said.

"I know, but it's the polite thing to do," I said. "When someone keeps you from being eaten toe by toe by woodland animals, the least you can do is send a little note. In fact, I'd like to send the note directly to the guys who found me. How do I do that?"

"You can't," Javna said.

"Why not?" I asked, innocently.

"The *Sparrowhawk* is a Special Forces ship," Newman said. "They run silent. Communication between Special Forces ships and the rest of the fleet is limited."

"Well, that doesn't seem very fair," I said. "I've been in the service for over a year, and I never had a problem getting mail to my friends on other ships. You would think even Special Forces soldiers would want to hear from their friends in the outside universe."

Newman and Javna glanced at each other. "We're getting off track," Newman said.

"All I want to do is send a note," I said.

"We'll look into it," Javna said, in a tone that said, *No we won't*.

I sighed and then told them, for probably the twentieth time, about why I gave permission to blow the *Modesto*'s shuttle bay doors.

"How's your jaw?" Dr. Fiorina asked.

"Fully functional and ready to chew on something," I said. "Not that I don't like soup through a straw, but it gets monotonous after a while."

"I sympathize," Fiorina said. "Now let's look at the leg." I pulled down the covers and let him take a look—the ring was now halfway down the calf. "Excellent," he said. "I want you to start walking on that. The unprocessed portion will support your weight, and it'll be good to give the leg a little exercise. I'll give you a cane to use for the next couple of days. I notice you have some friends who come to visit you. Why don't you have them take you to lunch or something."

"You don't have to tell me twice," I said, and flexed the new leg a little. "Good as new," I said.

"Better," Fiorina said. "We've made a few improvements to the CDF body structure since you were enlisted. They've been incorporated into the leg, and the rest of your body will feel the benefit, too."

"Makes you wonder why the CDF just doesn't go all the way," I said. "Replace the body with something designed totally for war."

Fiorina looked up from his data pad. "You have green skin, cat's eyes, and a computer in your skull," he said. "How much *less* human do you want to be?"

"That's a good point," I said.

"Indeed," Fiorina said. "I'll have an orderly bring in that cane." He tapped his data pad to send the order.

"Hey, doc," I said. "Did you treat anybody else who came off the *Sparrowhawk*?"

"No," he said. "Really, Corporal, you were challenge enough."

"So none of the *Sparrowhawk* crew?"

Fiorina smirked. "Oh, no. They're Special Forces."

"So?"

"Let's just say they have special needs," Fiorina said, and then the orderly came in with my cane.

"You know what you can find out about the Ghost Brigades? Officially, I mean," Harry said.

"I'm guessing not a lot," I said.

"Not a lot is an overstatement," Harry said. "You can't find out a damn thing."

Harry, Jesse and I were lunching at one of Phoenix station's commissaries. For my first trip out, I suggested we go as far away from Brenneman as we could. This particular commissary was on the other side of the station. The view was nothing special—it overlooked a small shipyard—but was known stationwide for its burgers, and the reputation was justified; the cook, in his past life, had begun a chain of specialty hamburger restaurants. For a literal hole in the wall, it was

constantly packed. But my and Harry's burgers were growing cold as we talked about the Ghost Brigades.

"I asked Javna and Newman about getting a note to the *Sparrowhawk* and got stonewalled," I said.

"Not surprised," Harry said. "Officially, the *Sparrowhawk* exists, but that's all you can find out. You can't find out anything about its crew, its size, its armament or its location. All the information isn't there. Do a more general search on Special Forces or 'Ghost Brigades' in the CDF database and you likewise get nothing."

"So you guys have nothing at all," Jesse said.

"Oh, I didn't say *that,*" Harry said, and smiled. "You can't find out anything officially, but unofficially there's lots to know."

"And how do you manage to find information unofficially?" Jesse said.

"Well, you know," Harry said. "My sparkling personality does wonders."

"Please," Jesse said. "I'm eating here. Which is more than you two can say."

"So what did you find out?" I asked, and took a bite of my burger. It was fabulous.

"Understand that this is all rumor and innuendo," Harry said.

"Which means that it's probably more accurate than what we'd get officially," I said.

"Possibly," Harry granted. "The big news is that there is indeed a reason why they're called 'Ghost Brigades.' It's not an official designation, you know. It's a nickname. The rumor, which I've heard from more than one place, is that Special Forces members are dead people."

"Excuse me?" I said. Jesse looked up from her burger.

"Not real dead people, per se," Harry said. "They're not zombies. But there are a lot of people who sign up to join the CDF who die before their seventy-fifth birthday. When that happens, apparently the CDF doesn't just throw out your DNA. They use it to make Special Forces members."

Something hit me. "Jesse, you remember when Leon Deak died? What the medical technician said? 'A last-minute volunteer for the

Ghost Brigades.' I thought it was just some kind of sick joke."

"How can they do that?" Jesse asked. "That's not ethical at all."

"Isn't it?" Harry said. "When you give your intent to sign up, you give the CDF the right to use whatever procedures necessary to enhance your combat readiness, and you can't be combat ready if you're dead. It's in the contract. If it's not ethical, it's at least legal."

"Yeah, but there's a difference between using my DNA to create a new body for me to use, and using the new body without *me* in it," Jesse said.

"Details, details," Harry said.

"I don't like the idea of my body running around on its own," Jesse said. "I don't think it's right for the CDF to do that."

"Well, that's not all they do," Harry said. "You know that these new bodies we have are deeply genetically modified. Well, apparently Special Forces bodies are even more modified than ours. The Special Forces soldiers are guinea pigs for new enhancements and abilities before they're introduced into the general population. And there are rumors that some of the modifications are truly radical—bodies modified to the point of not looking human anymore."

"My doctor said something about Special Forces soldiers having special needs," I said. "But even allowing for hallucinations, the people who rescued me looked human enough."

"And we didn't see any mutants or freaks on the *Sparrowhawk,*" Jesse said.

"We weren't allowed full run of the ship, either," Harry pointed out. "They kept us in one area and kept us disconnected from everything else. We saw the sick bay and we saw the rec area, and that was it."

"People see Special Forces in battle and walking around all the time," Jesse said.

"Sure they do," Harry said. "But that's not saying that they see *all* of them."

"Your paranoia is acting up again, sweetie," Jesse said, and fed Harry a french fry.

"Thank you, precious," Harry said, accepting it. "But even throwing out the rumor about supermodified Special Forces, there's

still enough there to account for John seeing his wife. It's not really Kathy, though. Just someone using her body."

"Who?" I said.

"Well, that's the question, isn't it," Harry said. "Your wife is dead, so they couldn't put her personality into the body. Either they have some sort of preformatted personality they put into Special Forces soldiers—"

"—or someone else went from an old body into her new one," I said.

Jesse shivered. "I'm sorry, John. But that's just creepy."

"John? You okay?" Harry said.

"What? Yeah, I'm fine," I said. "It's just a lot to deal with at one time. The idea that my wife could be alive—but not really—and that someone who *isn't* her is walking around in her skin. I think I almost preferred it when there was a possibility that I hallucinated her."

I looked over to Harry and Jesse. Both of them were frozen and staring.

"Guys?" I said.

"Speak of the devil," said Harry.

"What?" I said.

"John," Jesse said. "She's in line for a burger."

I spun around, knocking over my plate as I did so. Then I felt like I got dunked directly into a vat of ice.

"Holy shit," I said.

It was her. No doubt about it.

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FOURTEEN

I started to get up. Harry grabbed my hand.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm going to go talk to her," I said.

"You sure you want to do that?" he asked.

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "Of course I'm sure."

"What I'm saying is that maybe you'd want Jesse or me to talk to her first," Harry said. "To see if she wants to meet you."

"Jesus, Harry," I said. "This isn't the sixth fucking grade. That's my wife."

"No it's *not,* John," Harry said. "It's someone entirely different. You don't know if she will even want to speak to you."

"John, even if she does speak to you, you're going to be two total strangers," Jesse said. "Whatever you're expecting out of this encounter, you're not going to get it."

"I'm not expecting anything," I said.

"We just don't want you to be hurt," Jesse said.

"I'll be fine," I said, and looked at them both. "Please. Let me go, Harry. I'll be fine."

Harry and Jesse looked at each other. Harry let go of my hand.

"Thank you," I said.

"What are you going to say to her?" Harry wanted to know.

"I'm going to tell her thanks for saving my life," I said, and got up.

By this time, she and two companions had got their orders and had made their way to a small table farther back in the commissary. I

threaded my way to the table. The three of them were talking, but stopped as I approached. She had her back to me as I approached, and turned as her companions glanced up at me. I stopped as I got a look at her face.

It was different, of course. Beyond the obvious skin and eyes, she was so much younger than Kathy had been—a face that was as Kathy was half a century before. Even then, it was different; leaner than Kathy's had ever been, keeping with the CDF genetically-installed predisposition for fitness. Kathy's hair had always been a nearly uncontrolled mane, even as she aged and most other women switched to more matronly cuts; the woman in front of me kept her hair close on her head and off her collar.

It was the hair that was the most jarring. It'd been so long since I'd seen a person without green skin that it didn't register with me anymore. But the hair was nothing that I remembered.

"It's not nice to stare," the woman said, using Kathy's voice. "And before you ask, you're not my type."

Yes I am, a part of my brain said.

"I'm sorry, I don't really mean to intrude," I said. "I was just wondering if you might recognize me."

She flicked her eyes up and down on me. "I really don't," she said. "And trust me, we weren't in basic training together."

"You rescued me," I said. "On Coral."

She perked up a little at this. "No shit," she said. "No wonder I didn't recognize you. The last time I saw you, you were missing the lower half of your head. No offense. And no offense to this, either, but I'm amazed you're still alive. I wouldn't have bet on you to make it."

"I had something to live for," I said.

"Apparently," she said.

"I'm John Perry," I said, and held out my hand. "I'm afraid I don't know your name."

"Jane Sagan," she said, taking it. I held it a little longer than I should have. She had a slightly puzzled expression when I finally let go.

"Corporal Perry," one of her companions began; he had taken the opportunity to access information about me from his BrainPal, "we're

kind of in a rush to eat here; we have to be back to our ship in a half hour, so if you don't mind—"

"Do you recognize me from anywhere else?" I asked Jane, cutting him off.

"No," she said, slightly frosty now. "Thanks for coming over, but now I'd really like to eat."

"Let me send you something," I said. "A picture. Through your BrainPal."

"That's really not necessary," Jane said.

"One picture," I said. "Then I'll go. Humor me."

"Fine," she said. "Hurry it up."

Among the few possessions that I had taken with me when I left Earth was a digital photo album of family, friends and places that I had loved. When my BrainPal activated, I had uploaded the photos into its onboard memory, a smart move in retrospect since my photo album and all my other Earthly possessions but one went down with the *Modesto.* I accessed one particular photo from the album and sent it to her. I watched as she accessed her BrainPal, and then turned again to look at me.

"Do you recognize me now?" I asked.

She moved fast, faster than even normal CDF, grabbed me, and slammed me against a nearby bulkhead. I was pretty sure I felt one of my newly repaired ribs crack. From across the commissary Harry and Jesse leaped up and moved in; Jane's companions moved to intercept. I tried to breathe.

"Who the fuck are you," Jane hissed at me, "and what are you trying to pull?"

"I'm John Perry," I wheezed. "I'm not trying to pull anything."

"Bullshit. Where did you get that picture?" she said, close up, low. "Who made it for you?"

"No one made it for me," I said, equally low. "I got that picture at my wedding. It's…my wedding photo." I almost said *our wedding photo,* but caught myself just in time. "The woman in the picture is my wife, Kathy. She died before she could enlist. They took her DNA and used it to make you. Part of her is in you. Part of you is in that picture.

Part of what you are gave me this." I held up my left hand and showed her my wedding ring—my only remaining Earthly possession.

Jane snarled, picked me up and hurled me hard across the room. I skipped over a couple of tabletops, knocking away hamburgers, condiment packages and napkin holders before coming to rest on the ground. Along the way I clocked my head on a metal corner; there was the briefest of oozes coming from my temple. Harry and Jesse disengaged from their wary dance with Jane's companions and headed over to me. Jane stalked toward me but was stopped by her friends halfway across.

"Listen to me, Perry," she said. "You stay the fuck away from me from now on. The next time I see you you're going to wish I'd left you for dead." She stalked off. One of her companions followed after her; the other, who had spoken to me earlier, came over to us. Jesse and Harry got up to engage him, but he put his hands out in a sign of truce.

"Perry," he said. "What was that all about? What did you send her?"

"Ask her yourself, pal," I said.

"That's *Lieutenant* Tagore to you, Corporal." Tagore looked at Harry and Jesse. "I know you two," he said. "You were on the *Hampton Roads.*"

"Yes, sir," Harry said.

"Listen to me, all of you," he said. "I don't know what the hell that was about, but I want to be very clear about this. Whatever it was, we weren't part of it. Tell whatever story you want, but if the words 'Special Forces' are anywhere in it, I'm going to make it my personal mission to ensure that the rest of your military career is short and painful. I'm not kidding. I *will* fuck your skull. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir," Jesse said. Harry nodded. I wheezed.

"Get your friend looked after," Tagore said to Jesse. "He looks like he just got the shit kicked out of him." He walked out.

"Christ, John," Jesse said, taking a napkin and cleaning off my head wound. "What did you do?"

"I sent her a wedding photo," I said.

"That's subtle," Harry said, and looked around. "Where's your cane?"

"I think it's over by the wall she slammed me into," I said. Harry left to go get it.

"Are you okay?" Jesse said to me.

"I think I busted a rib," I said.

"That's not what I meant," she said.

"I know what you meant," I said. "And as far as that goes, I think something else is busted, too."

Jesse cupped my face with her hand. Harry came back with my cane. We limped back to the hospital. Dr. Fiorina was extremely displeased with me.

Someone nudged me awake. When I saw who it was, I tried to speak. She clapped a hand over my mouth.

"Quiet," Jane said. "I'm not supposed to be here."

I nodded. She took her hand away. "Talk low," she said.

"We could use BrainPals," I said.

"No," she said. "I want to hear your voice. Just keep it down."

"Okay," I said.

"I'm sorry about today," she said. "It was just unexpected. I don't know how to react to something like that."

"It's all right," I said. "I shouldn't have broken it to you that way."

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

"You cracked a rib," I said.

"Sorry about that," she said.

"Already healed," I said.

She studied my face, eyes flicking back and forth. "Look, I'm not your wife," she said suddenly. "I don't know who you think I am or what I am, but I was never your wife. I didn't know she existed until you showed me the picture today."

"You had to know about where you came from," I said.

"Why?" she said hotly. "We know we've been made from someone else's genes, but they don't tell us who they were. What would be the point? That person's not us. We're not even clones—I've got things in my DNA that aren't even from Earth. We're the CDF guinea pigs, haven't you heard?"

"I heard," I said.

"So I'm not your wife. That's what I've come here to say. I'm sorry, but I'm not."

"All right," I said.

"Okay," she said. "Good. I'm going now. Sorry about throwing you across the room."

"How old are you?" I asked.

"What? Why?" she asked.

"I'm just curious," I said. "And I don't want you to go yet."

"I don't know what my age has got to do with anything," she said.

"Kathy's been dead for nine years now," I said. "I want to know how long they bothered to wait before mining her genes to make you."

"I'm six years old," she said.

"I hope you don't mind if I say you don't look like most six-year-olds that I've met," I said.

"I'm advanced for my age," she said. Then, "That was a joke."

"I know," I said.

"People don't get that sometimes," she said. "It's because most of the people I know are around the same age."

"How does it work?" I said. "I mean, what's it like? Being six. Not having a past."

Jane shrugged. "I woke up one day and I didn't know where I was or what was going on. But I was already in this body, and I already knew things. How to speak. How to move. How to think and fight. I was told I was in Special Forces, and that it was time to start training, and my name was Jane Sagan."

"Nice name," I said.

"It was randomly selected," she said. "Our first names are common names, our last names are mostly from scientists and philosophers. There's a Ted Einstein and a Julie Pasteur in my squad. At first you don't know that, of course. About the names. Later you learn a little bit about how you were made, after they've let you develop your own sense of who you are. No one you know has many memories. It's not until you meet realborn that you know that anything's really different about you. And we don't meet them very often. We don't really mix."

"'Realborn'?" I asked.

"It's what we call the rest of you," she said.

"If you don't mix, what were you doing at the commissary?" I said.

"I wanted a burger," she said. "It's not that we can't, mostly. It's that we don't."

"Did you ever wonder about who you were made from?" I asked.

"Sometimes," Jane said. "But we can't know. They don't tell us about our progies—the people we're made from. Some of us are made from more than one, you know. But they're all dead anyway. Have to be or they wouldn't use them to make us. And we don't know who knew them, and if the people who knew them get in the service, it's not like they'd find us most of the time. And you realborn die pretty damn fast out here. I don't know anyone else who's ever met a progie's relative. Or a husband."

"Did you show your lieutenant the picture?" I asked.

"No," she said. "He asked about it. I told him you sent me a picture of yourself, and that I trashed it. And I did, so the action would register if he looked. I haven't told anyone about what we said. Can I have it again? The picture?"

"Of course," I said. "I have others, too, if you want them. If you want to know about Kathy, I can tell you about her as well."

Jane stared at me in the dim room; in the low light she looked more like Kathy than ever. I ached just a little to look at her. "I don't know," she said, finally. "I don't know what I want to know. Let me think about it. Give me that one picture for now. Please."

"I'm sending it now," I said.

"I have to go," she said. "Listen, I wasn't here. And if you see me anywhere else, don't let on that we've met."

"Why not?" I asked.

"It's important for now," she said.

"All right," I said.

"Let me see your wedding ring," Jane asked.

"Sure," I said, and slipped it off to let her look at it. She held it gingerly, and peered through it.

"It says something," she said.

"'My Love is Eternal—Kathy,'" I said. "She had it inscribed before she gave it to me."

"How long were you married?" she asked.

"Forty-two years," I said.

"How much did you love her?" Jane asked. "Your wife. Kathy. When people are married for a long time, maybe they stay together out of habit."

"Sometimes they do," I said. "But I loved her very much. All the time we were married. I love her now."

Jane stood up, looked at me again, gave me back my ring, and left without saying good-bye.

"Tachyons," said Harry as he approached my and Jesse's breakfast table.

"Bless you," said Jesse.

"Very funny," he said, sitting down. "Tachyons may be the answer to how the Rraey knew we were coming."

"That's great," I said. "Now if only Jesse and I knew what tachyons were, we'd be a lot more excited about them."

"They're exotic subatomic particles," Harry said. "They travel faster than light and backward through time. So far they've just been a theory, because after all it's difficult to track something that is both faster than light and going backward in time. But the physics of skip drive theory allows for the presence of tachyons at any skip—just as our matter and energy translates into a different universe, tachyons from the destination universe travel back into the universe being left behind. There's a specific tachyon pattern a skip drive makes at a translation event. If you can spot tachyons forming that pattern, you'd know a ship with a skip drive was coming in—and when."

"Where do you hear this stuff?" I said.

"Unlike the two of you, I don't spend my days lounging about," Harry said. "I've made friends in interesting places."

"If we knew about this tachyon pattern or whatever it is, why didn't we do something about it before?" Jesse asked. "What you're saying is that we've been vulnerable all this time, and just been lucky so far."

"Well, remember what I said about tachyons being theoretical to this point," Harry said. "That's sort of an understatement. They're less than real—they're mathematical abstractions at best. They have no relation to the real universes in which we exist and move. No race of intelligence that we know of has ever used them for anything. They have no practical application."

"Or so we thought," I said.

Harry gave a hand motion of assent. "If this guess is correct, then it means that the Rraey have a technology that's well beyond what we have the capability to create ourselves. We're behind them in this technology race."

"So how do we catch up?" Jesse said.

Harry smiled. "Well, who said anything about catching up? Remember when we first met, on the beanstalk, and we talked about the colonies' superior technology? You remember how I suggested they got it?"

"Through encounters with aliens," Jesse said.

"Right," Harry said. "We either trade for it or take it in battle. Now, if there really is a way to track tachyons from one universe to another, we could probably develop the technology ourselves to do it. But that's going to take time and resources we don't have. Far more practical to simply take it from the Rraey."

"You're saying the CDF is planning to go back to Coral," I said.

"Of course we are," Harry said. "But the goal now isn't just to take the planet back. It's not even going to be the primary goal. Now, our primary goal is to get our hands on their tachyon detection technology and find a way to defeat it or use it against them."

"The last time we went to Coral we got our asses kicked," Jesse said.

"We're not going to have a choice, Jesse," Harry said gently. "We have to get this technology. If the technology spreads, every race out there will be able to track Colonial movement. In a very real sense, they'll know we're coming before we do."

"It's going to be a massacre again," Jesse said.

"I suspect they'll use a lot more of the Special Forces this time around," Harry said.

"Speaking of which," I said, and then told Harry of my encounter with Jane the night before, which I had been recounting to Jesse as Harry walked up.

"It looks like she's not planning to kill you after all," Harry said after I was finished.

"It must have been so strange to talk to her," Jesse said. "Even though you know she's not really your wife."

"Not to mention being just six years old. Man, that's odd," Harry said.

"It shows, too," I said. "The being six part. She doesn't have much emotional maturity. She doesn't seem to know what to do with emotions when she has them. She threw me across the room because she didn't know how else to deal with what she was feeling."

"Well, all she knows is fighting and killing," Harry said. "We have a life of memories and experiences to stabilize us. Even younger soldiers in traditional armies have twenty years of experiences. In a real sense, these Special Forces troops are children warriors. It's ethically borderline."

"I don't want to open any old wounds," Jesse said. "But do you see any of Kathy in her?"

I thought about it a moment. "She looks like Kathy, obviously," I said. "And I think I saw a little of Kathy's sense of humor in her, and a little of her temperament. Kathy could be impulsive."

"Did she ever throw you across the room?" Harry asked, smiling.

I grinned back. "There were a couple of times that if she could have, she would have," I said.

"Score one for genetics," Harry said.

Asshole suddenly clicked to life. Corporal Perry, the message read. Your presence is required at a briefing with General Keegan at 1000 hrs at Operational HQ in the Eisenhower Module of Phoenix Station. Be prompt. I acknowledged the message and told Harry and Jesse.

"And I thought *I* had friends in interesting places," Harry said. "You've been holding out on us, John."

"I have no idea what this is about," I said. "I've never met Keegan before."

"He's only the commander of the CDF Second Army," Harry said. "I'm sure it's nothing important."

"Funny," I said.

"It's 0915 now, John," Jesse said. "You'd better get moving. You want us to walk with you?"

"No, please finish breakfast," I said. "It'll be good for me to have the walk. The Eisenhower Module is only a couple of klicks around the station. I can make it in time." I got up, grabbed a donut to eat on the way, gave Jesse a friendly peck on the cheek and headed off.

In fact, the Eisenhower Module was more than a couple of klicks away, but my leg had finally grown in, and I wanted the exercise. Dr. Fiorina was right—the new leg did feel better than new, and overall I felt as if I had more energy. Of course, I had just recovered from injuries so grave it was a miracle that I lived. Anyone would feel like they had more energy after that.

"Don't turn around," Jane said, into my ear, from directly behind me.

I nearly choked on a bite of donut. "I wish you wouldn't keep sneaking up on me," I finally said, not turning around.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm not intentionally trying to annoy you. But I shouldn't be talking to you. Listen, this briefing you're about to go to."

"How do you know about that?" I said.

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that you agree to what they ask of you. Do it. It's the way you're going to be safe for what's coming up. As safe as can be."

"What's coming up?" I asked.

"You'll find out soon enough," she said.

"What about my friends," I said. "Harry and Jesse. Are they in trouble?"

"We're all in trouble," Jane said. "I can't do anything for them. I worked to sell you as it is. Do this. It's important." There was a quick touch of a hand on my arm, and then I could tell she was gone again.

"Corporal Perry," General Keegan said, returning my salute. "At ease."

I had been escorted into a conference room with more brass in it than an eighteenth-century schooner. I was easily the lowest-ranking person in the room; the next lowest rank, as far as I could tell, as a lieutenant colonel, was Newman, my esteemed questioner. I felt a little queasy.

"You look a little lost, son," General Keegan said to me. He looked, as did everyone in the room, and every soldier in the CDF, no more than in his late twenties.

"I feel a little lost, sir," I said.

"Well, that's understandable," Keegan said. "Please, sit down." He motioned to an empty chair at the table; I took it and sat down. "I've heard a lot about you, Perry."

"Yes, sir," I said, trying not to glance over at Newman.

"You don't sound excited about that, Corporal," he said.

"I'm not trying to be noticed, sir," I said. "Just trying to do my part."

"Be that as it may, you have been noticed," Keegan said. "A hundred shuttles managed to get launched over Coral, but yours was the only one to make it to the surface, in great part due to your orders to pop the shuttle bay doors and get the hell out of there." He jerked a thumb to Newman. "Newman here's been telling me all about it. He thinks we should give you a medal for it."

Keegan could have said, *Newman thinks you should star in the army's annual performance of* Swan Lake, and I would not have been as surprised as I was. Keegan noticed the expression on my face and grinned. "Yes, I know what you were thinking. Newman has the best straight face in the business, which is why he has the job he does. Well, what about it, Corporal? Think you deserve that medal?"

"Respectfully, sir, no," I said. "We crashed and there were no survivors other than myself. It's hardly meritorious service. Beyond that, any praise in making it to the surface of Coral belongs to my pilot, Fiona Eaton."

"Pilot Eaton has already been decorated posthumously, Corporal," General Keegan said. "Small consolation to her, being dead as she is, but it's important to the CDF that such actions are noted somewhere by us. And despite your modesty, Corporal, you will be decorated as

well. Others survived the Battle of Coral, but that was by luck. You took initiative and showed leadership in an adverse situation. And you've shown your capacity to think on your feet before. That firing solution against the Consu. Your leadership in your training platoon. Master Sergeant Ruiz made special note of your use of the BrainPal in the final training war game. I served with that son of a bitch, Corporal. Ruiz wouldn't compliment his mother for giving birth to him, if you know what I mean."

"I think I do, sir," I said.

"That's what I thought. So a Bronze Star for you, son. Congratulations."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Thank you, sir."

"But I didn't ask you here for that purpose," General Keegan said, and then motioned down the table. "I don't believe you've met General Szilard, who heads our Special Forces. At ease, no need to salute."

"Sir," I said, nodding in his direction, at least.

"Corporal," Szilard said. "Tell me, what have you heard about the situation over Coral?"

"Not very much, sir," I said. "Just conversations with friends."

"Really," Szilard said, dryly. "I would think your friend Private Wilson would have given you a comprehensive briefing by now."

I was beginning to realize that my poker face, never very good, was even less so these days. "Yes, of course we know about Private Wilson," Szilard said. "You might want to tell him that his snooping around is not nearly as subtle as he thinks it is."

"Harry will be surprised to hear it," I said.

"No doubt," Szilard said. "I also have no doubt he's also appraised you on the nature of the Special Forces soldiers. It's not a state secret, incidentally, although we don't put information on the Special Forces in the general database. Most of our time is spent on missions that require strict secrecy and confidentiality. We have very few opportunities to spend much time with the rest of you. Not much inclination either."

"General Szilard and Special Forces are taking the lead on our counterattack on the Rraey at Coral," General Keegan said. "While we intend to take the planet, our immediate concern is to isolate their

tachyon detection apparatus, disable it without destroying it if we can, but destroy it if we must. Colonel Golden here"—Keegan motioned to a somber-looking man next to Newman—"believes we know where it is. Colonel."

"Very briefly, Corporal," Golden said. "Our surveillance before the first attack on Coral showed the Rraey deploying a series of small satellites in orbits around Coral. At first we thought them to be spy satellites to help the Rraey identify Colonial and troop movement on the planet, but now we think it's an array designed to spot tachyon patterns. We believe the tracking station, which compiles the data from the satellites, is on the planet itself, landed there during the first wave of the attack."

"We think it's on the planet because they figure it's safest there," General Szilard said. "If it were on a ship, there's a chance an attacking CDF ship might hit it, if only by sheer luck. And as you know, no ship but your shuttle got anywhere close to the Coral surface. It's a good bet it's there."

I turned to Keegan. "May I ask a question, sir."

"Go ahead," Keegan said.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked. "I'm a corporal with no squad, platoon or battalion. I can't see why I should need to know this."

"You need to know this because you're one of the few survivors of the Battle of Coral, and the only one that survived by something more than chance," Keegan said. "General Szilard and his people believe, and I agree, that their counterattack has a better chance of succeeding if someone who was there in the first attack advises and observes the second. That means you."

"With all due respect, sir," I said. "My participation was minimal and disastrous."

"Less disastrous than almost everyone else's," Keegan said. "Corporal, I won't lie to you—I'd prefer we'd have someone else in this role. However, as it stands, we do not. Even if the amount of advice and service you can give is minimal, it is better than nothing at all. Besides, you've shown the ability to improvise and act quickly in combat situations. You will be of use."

"What would I do?" I asked. Keegan glanced over to Szilard.

"You'd be stationed on the *Sparrowhawk,*" Szilard said. "They represent the Special Forces with the most experience in this particular situation. Your job would be to advise the *Sparrowhawk* senior staff on your experience at Coral, observe, and act as liaison between CDF regular forces and Special Forces if one is required."

"Would I fight?" I asked.

"You're a supernumerary," Szilard said. "You would most likely not be required to participate in the actual engagement."

"You understand that this assignment is highly unusual," Keegan said. "As a practical matter, due to differences in mission and in personnel, regular CDF and Special Forces are almost never mixed. Even in battles in which the two forces are engaged against a single enemy, both tend to perform separate and mutually exclusive roles."

"I understand," I said. I understood more than they knew. Jane was stationed on the *Sparrowhawk.*

As if following my train of thought, Szilard spoke up. "Corporal, I do understand that you had an incident with one of my people—one stationed on the *Sparrowhawk.* I need to know that there will be no other incidents like that one."

"Yes, sir," I said. "The incident was over a misunderstanding. A case of mistaken identity. It won't happen again."

Szilard nodded to Keegan. "Very well," Keegan said. "Corporal, given your new role, I think your rank is deficit to the task. You are hereby promoted to lieutenant, effective immediately, and will present yourself to Major Crick, CO of the *Sparrowhawk,* at 1500. That should give you enough time to get your things in order and say your goodbyes. Any questions?"

"No, sir," I said. "But I have one request."

"Not the usual thing," Keegan said, after I had finished. "And in other circumstances—in both cases—I would say no."

"I understand, sir," I said.

"However, it will be arranged. And some good might come out of it. Very well, Lieutenant. You're dismissed."

Harry and Jesse met me as soon as they could after I messaged them. I told them of my assignment and promotion.

"You think Jane engineered this," Harry said.

"I know she did," I said. "She told me she had. As it happens, I may actually turn out to be useful in some way. But I'm sure she planted a bug in someone's ear. I'm on my way in just a few hours."

"We're being broken up again," Jesse said. "And what's left of Harry's and my platoon is being split up, too. Our platoon mates are getting assignments to other ships. We're waiting to hear our own assignments."

"Who knows, John," Harry said. "We'll probably be back at Coral with you."

"No, you won't," I said. "I asked General Keegan to advance you both out of general infantry and he agreed. Your first term of service is done. You've both been reassigned."

"What are you talking about?" Harry said.

"You've been reassigned to CDF's Military Research arm," I said. "Harry, they knew about you snooping around. I convinced them you'd do less harm to yourself and others this way. You're going to work on whatever we bring back from Coral."

"I can't do that," Harry said. "I don't have the math for it."

"I'm sure you won't let that stop you," I said. "Jesse, you're going to MR, too, on the support staff. It's all I could get you on short notice. It's not going be very interesting, but you can train for other roles while you're there. And you'll both be out of the line of fire."

"This isn't right, John," Jesse said. "We haven't served our time. Our platoon mates are going back out to fight while we'll be sitting here for something we didn't do. *You're* going back out there. I don't want this. I should serve my time." Harry nodded.

"Jesse, Harry, please," I said. "Look. Alan is dead. Susan and Thomas are dead. Maggie is dead. My squad and my platoon are all gone. Everyone I've ever cared about out here is gone but you two. I had a chance to keep you two alive and I took it. I couldn't do anything for anyone else. I can do something for you. I need you to be alive. You're all I have out here."

"You have Jane," Jesse said.

“I don’t know what Jane is to me yet,” I said. “But I know what you are to me. You’re my family now. Jesse, Harry. You’re my family. Don’t be angry with me for wanting to keep you safe. Just *be* safe. For me. Please.”

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FIFTEEN

Sparrowhawk was a quiet ship. Your average troopship is filled with the sounds of people talking, laughing, yelling and going through the verbal motions of their lives. Special Forces soldiers don't do any of that crap.

As was explained to me by the *Sparrowhawk*'s CO when I came on board. "Don't expect people to talk to you," Major Crick said as I presented myself.

"Sir?" I said.

"The Special Forces soldiers," he said. "It's not anything personal, it's just we're not much for talking. When we're by ourselves, we communicate almost exclusively by BrainPal. It's faster, and we don't have a bias toward talking, like you do. We're born with BrainPals. The first time anyone ever talks to us, it's with one of them. So it's the way we talk most of the time. Don't be offended. Anyway, I've ordered the troops to speak to you if they have something they need to get across."

"That's not necessary, sir," I said. "I can use my BrainPal."

"You wouldn't be able to keep up," Major Crick said. "Your brain is set to communicate at one speed, and ours at another. Talking to realborn is like talking at half speed. If you've talked to any of us for a great deal of time, you might notice we seem abrupt and curt. It's a side effect of feeling like you're talking to a slow child. No offense."

"None taken, sir," I said. "You seem to communicate well."

"Well, as a CO, I spend a lot of time with non-Special Forces," Crick said. "Also, I'm older than most of my troops. I've picked up a

few social graces."

"How old are you, sir?" I asked.

"I'll be fourteen next week," he said. "Now, I'll be having a staff meeting tomorrow at 0600. Until then, get yourself set up and comfortable, have some chow, and get a little rest. We'll talk more in the morning." He saluted and I was dismissed.

Jane was waiting in my quarters.

"You again," I said, smiling.

"Me again," she said, simply. "I wanted to know how you're getting along."

"Fine," I said. "Considering I've been on the ship for fifteen minutes."

"We're all talking about you," Jane said.

"Yes, I can tell by the endless chatter," I said. Jane opened her mouth to speak, but I held up my hand. "That was a joke," I said. "Major Crick told me about the BrainPal thing."

"It's why I like talking to you like this," Jane said. "It's not like talking to anyone else."

"I seem to remember you talking when you rescued me," I said.

"We were worried about being tracked then," Jane said. "Speaking was more secure. We also speak when we're out in public. We don't like to draw attention to ourselves when we don't have to."

"Why did you arrange this?" I asked her. "Getting me stationed here on the *Sparrowhawk.*"

"You're useful to us," Jane said. "You have experience that may be useful, both on Coral and for another element of our preparation."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Major Crick will talk about it tomorrow at the briefing," Jane said. "I'll be there, too. I command a platoon and do intelligence work."

"Is that the only reason?" I asked. "That I'm useful?"

"No," Jane said, "but it's the reason that got you onto the ship. Listen, I won't be spending too much time with you. I have too many things to do preparing for our mission. But I want to know about her. About Kathy. Who she was. What she was like. I want you to tell me."

"I'll tell you about her," I said. "On one condition."

"What?" Jane asked.

"You have to tell me about you," I said.

"Why?"

"Because for nine years I've been living with the fact my wife is dead, and now you're here and it's messing me up inside," I said. "The more I know about you, the more I can get used to the idea that you're not her."

"I'm not that interesting," Jane said. "And I'm only six. That's hardly any time to have done anything."

"I've done more things in the last year than I did in all the years leading up to it," I said. "Trust me. Six years is enough."

"Sir, want company?" the nice young (probably four-year-old) Special Forces soldier said as he and four of his buddies held their meal trays at attention.

"The table's empty," I said.

"Some people prefer to eat alone," the soldier said.

"I'm not one of them," I said. "Please, sit, all of you."

"Thank you, sir," the soldier said, putting his tray on the table. "I'm Corporal Sam Mendel. These are Privates George Linnaeus, Will Hegel, Jim Bohr, and Jan Fermi."

"Lieutenant John Perry," I said.

"So, what do you think of the *Sparrowhawk*, sir?" Mendel asked.

"It's nice and quiet," I said.

"That it is, sir," Mendel said. "I was just mentioning to Linnaeus that I don't think I've spoken more than ten words in about a month."

"You've just broken your record, then," I said.

"Would you mind settling a bet for us, sir?" Mendel said.

"Does it involve me doing anything strenuous?" I asked.

"No, sir," Mendel said. "We just want to know how old you are. You see, Hegel here is betting your age is older than twice the combined ages of our entire squad."

"How old are you all?" I asked.

"The squad has ten soldiers in it including myself," Mendel said, "and I'm the oldest. I'm five and a half. The rest are between two and five years old. Total age is thirty-seven years and about two months."

"I'm seventy-six," I said. "So he's right. Although any CDF recruit would have let him win his bet. We don't even enlist until we're seventy-five. And let me just say, there's something profoundly disturbing about being twice as old as your entire squad, combined."

"Yes, sir," Mendel said. "But on the other hand, we've all been in *this* life at least twice as long as you. So it comes out about even."

"I suppose it does at that," I said.

"It must be interesting, sir," Bohr said, a little down the table. "You had an entire life before this one. What was it like?"

"What was what like?" I said. "My life, or just having a life before this one?"

"Either," Bohr said.

I suddenly realized that none of the five other members of the table had even picked up their forks to eat. The rest of the mess hall, which had been alive with the telegraph-tapping sounds of utensils hitting trays, had also gone largely quiet. I recalled Jane's comment about everyone being interested in me. Apparently, she was right.

"I liked *my* life," I said. "I don't know that it was exciting or even interesting to anyone who didn't live it. But for me, it was a good life. As for the idea of having a life before this one, I didn't really think about it at the time. I never really thought about what this life would be like before I was in it."

"Why did you choose it, then?" Bohr asked. "You had to have some idea of what it was like."

"No, I didn't," I said. "I don't think any of us did. Most of us had never been in a war or in the military. None of us knew that they would take who we were and put it into a new body that was only partially what we were before."

"That seems kind of stupid, sir," Bohr said, and I was reminded that being two or whatever age he was, was not conducive to tact. "I don't know why anyone would choose to sign up for something when he really had no idea of what he was getting into."

"Well," I said, "you've also never been old. An unmodified person at seventy-five is a lot more willing to take a leap of faith than you might be."

"How different can it be?" Bohr asked.

"Spoken like a two-year-old who will never age," I said.

"I'm three," Bohr said, a little defensively.

I held up my hand. "Look," I said. "Let's turn this around for a minute. I'm seventy-six, and I did make a leap of faith when I joined the CDF. On the other hand, it *was* my choice. I didn't have to go. If you have a hard time imagining what it must be like for me, think about it on my end." I pointed to Mendel. "When I was five, I hardly knew how to tie my own shoes. If you can't imagine what it's like to be *my* age and joining up, imagine how hard it is for me to imagine being an adult at five years of age and knowing nothing *but* war. If nothing else, I have an idea of what life is like outside the CDF. What is it like for you?"

Mendel looked at his companions, who looked back at him. "It's not anything we usually think about, sir," Mendel said. "We don't know that there's anything unusual about it at first. Everyone we know was 'born' the same way. It's you who are the unusual ones, from our perspective. Having a childhood and living an entire other life before you get into this one. It just seems like an inefficient way to do things."

"Don't you ever wonder about what it would be like not to be in the Special Forces?" I asked.

"I can't imagine it," Bohr said, and the others nodded. "We're all soldiers together. It's what we do. It's who we *are.*"

"That's why we find you so interesting," Mendel said. "This idea that this life would be a choice. The idea that there's another way to live. It's alien."

"What did you do, sir?" asked Bohr. "In your other life?"

"I was a writer," I said. They all looked at each other. "What?" I asked.

"Strange way to live, sir," Mendel said. "To get paid for stringing words together."

"There were worse jobs," I said.

"We don't mean to offend you, sir," Bohr said.

"I'm not offended," I said. "You just have a different perspective on things. But it does make me wonder why you do it."

"Do what?" Bohr said.

"Fight," I said. "You know, most people in the CDF are like me. And most people in the colonies are even more different from you than I am. Why would you fight for them? And with us?"

"We're *human,* sir," Mendel said. "No less than you are."

"Given the current state of my DNA, that's not saying much," I said.

"You know you're human, sir," Mendel said. "And so do we. You and we are closer than you think. We know about how the CDF picks its recruits. You're fighting for colonists you've never met—colonists who were your country's enemy at one point. Why do you fight for *them*?"

"Because they're human and because I said I would," I said. "At least, that's why I did at the start. Now I don't fight for the colonists. I mean, I do, but when it comes down to it, I fight—or did fight—for my platoon and my squad. I looked out for them, and they looked out for me. I fought because doing any less would have been letting them down."

Mendel nodded. "That's why we fight, too, sir," he said. "So that's one thing makes us all human together. That's good to know."

"It is," I agreed. Mendel grinned and picked up his fork to eat, and as he did, the room came alive with the clattering utensils. I looked up at the noise, and from a far corner saw Jane staring back at me.

Major Crick got right to the point at the morning briefing. "CDF intelligence believes the Rraey are frauds," he said. "And the first part of our mission is to find out if they're right. We're going to be paying a little visit to the Consu."

That woke me right up. Apparently I wasn't the only one. "What the hell do the Consu have to do with any of this?" asked Lieutenant Tagore, who sat directly to my left.

Crick nodded to Jane, who was sitting near him. "At the request of Major Crick and others, I did some research into some of the other CDF encounters with the Rraey to see if there's been any indication of technological evolution," Jane said. "Over the last hundred years, we've had twelve significant military encounters with the Rraey and several

dozen smaller engagements, including one major encounter and six smaller engagements over the last five years. During this entire time, the Rraey technological curve has been substantially behind our own. This is due to a number of factors, including their own cultural biases against systematic technological advancement and their lack of positive engagement with more technologically advanced races."

"In other words, they're backward and bigoted," Major Crick said.

"In the case of skip drive technology, this is especially the case," Jane said. "Up until the Battle of Coral, Rraey skip technology was far behind ours—in fact, their current understanding of skip physics is directly based on information provided by the CDF a little over a century ago, during an aborted trade mission to the Rraey."

"Why was it aborted?" asked Captain Jung, from across the table.

"The Rraey ate about a third of the trade delegates," Jane said.

"Ouch," said Captain Jung.

"The point here is that given who the Rraey are and what their level of tech is, it's impossible that they could have gone from being so far behind us to so far ahead of us in one leap," Major Crick said. "The best guess is that they didn't—they simply got the tech for skip drive prediction from some other culture. We know everyone the Rraey know, and there's only one culture that we estimate has the technological ability for something like this."

"The Consu," said Tagore.

"The Consu indeed," agreed Crick. "Those bastards have a white dwarf yoked to the wheel. It's not unreasonable to assume they might have skip drive prediction licked as well."

"But why would they have anything to do with the Rraey?" asked Lieutenant Dalton, down near the end of the table. "The only time they deal with *us* is when they want a little exercise, and we're far more technologically advanced than the Rraey are."

"The thinking is that the Consu aren't motivated by technology like we are," Jane said. "Our tech is valueless to them much in the same way the secrets of a steam engine might be valueless to us. We think they're motivated by other factors."

"Religion," I said. All eyes shifted to me, and I suddenly felt like a choirboy who has just farted during a chapel service. "What I mean is,

when my platoon was fighting the Consu, they started with a prayer that consecrated the battle. I said to a friend at the time that I thought the Consu thought they were baptizing the planet with the battle." More stares. "Of course, I could be wrong."

"You're not wrong," Crick said. "There's been some debate in the CDF about why the Consu fight at all, since it's clear that with their technology they could wipe out every other space-faring culture in the region without much of a second thought. The prevailing thought is that they do it for entertainment, like we play baseball or football."

"*We* never play football or baseball," said Tagore.

"Other humans do, jackass," Crick said with a grin, then sobered up again. "However, a significant minority of CDF's intelligence division believes that their battles have ritual significance, just as Lieutenant Perry has suggested. The Rraey may not be able to trade tech with the Consu on an equal basis, but they might have something else the Consu want. They might be able to give them their souls."

"But the Rraey are zealots themselves," Dalton said. "That's why they attacked Coral in the first place."

"They have several colonies, some less desirable than others," Jane said. "Zealots or not, they might see trading one of their less successful colonies for Coral as a good trade."

"Not so good for the Rraey on the traded colony," Dalton said.

"Really, ask me if I care about *them,*" Crick said.

"The Consu have given the Rraey technology that puts them far ahead of the rest of the cultures in this part of space," Jung said. "Even for the mighty Consu, tipping the balance of power in the region has to have repercussions."

"Unless the Consu shortchanged the Rraey," I said.

"What do you mean?" Jung said.

"We're assuming that the Consu gave the Rraey the technological expertise to create the skip drive detection system," I said. "But it's possible that they simply gave a single machine to the Rraey, with an owner's manual or something like that so they could operate it. That way, the Rraey get what they want, which is a way to defend Coral from us, while the Consu avoid substantially disrupting the balance of power in the area."

"Until the Rraey figure out how the damn thing works," Jung said.

"Given their native state of technology, that could take years," I said. "Enough time for us to kick their ass and take that technology away from them. *If* the Consu did actually give them the technology. *If* the Consu only gave them a single machine. *If* the Consu actually give a shit about the balance of power in the region. A lot of 'ifs.'"

"And it is to find out the answer to those 'ifs' that we're going to drop in on the Consu," Crick said. "We've already sent a skip drone to let them know we're coming. We'll see what we can get out of them."

"What colony are we going to offer them?" Dalton asked. It was difficult to tell if he was joking.

"No colonies," Crick said. "But we have something that might induce them to give us an audience."

"What do we have?" Dalton asked.

"We have him," Crick said, and pointed at me.

"Him?" Dalton said.

"Me?" I said.

"You," Jane said.

"I'm suddenly confused and terrified," I said.

"Your two-shot firing solution allowed CDF forces to rapidly kill thousands of Consu," Jane said. "In the past, the Consu have been receptive to embassies from the colonies when they have included a CDF soldier who has killed a large number of Consu in battle. Since it was your firing solution specifically that allowed the quick end of those Consu fighters, their deaths accrue to you."

"You've got the blood of 8,433 Consu on your hands," Crick said.

"Great," I said.

"It *is* great," Crick said. "Your presence is going to get us in the door."

"What's going to happen to me *after* we get through the door?" I asked. "Imagine what we would do to a Consu who'd killed eight thousand of us."

"They don't think the same way we do about that," Jane said. "You should be safe."

"*Should* be," I said.

"The alternative is being blasted out of the sky when we show up in Consu space," Crick said.

"I understand," I said. "I just wish I'd been given a little more lead time to get used to the idea."

"It was a rapidly evolving situation," Jane said nonchalantly. And suddenly I got a BrainPal message. *Trust me*—it said. I looked back at Jane, who was looking placidly at me. I nodded, acknowledging one message while appearing to acknowledge the other.

"What do we do after they're done admiring Lieutenant Perry?" asked Tagore.

"If everything goes according to past encounters, we'll have the opportunity to ask up to five questions of the Consu," Jane said. "The actual number of questions will be determined by a contest involving combat between five of us and five of them. The combat is one on one. The Consu fight unarmed, but our fighters will be allowed knives to compensate for our lack of slashing arms. The one thing to be especially aware of is that in previous cases where we've had this ritual, the Consu we've fought were disgraced soldiers or criminals for whom this battle can restore honor. So needless to say, they're very determined. We get to ask as many questions as the number of contests we win."

"How do you win the contest?" Tagore asked.

"You kill the Consu, or it kills you," Jane said.

"Fascinating," Tagore said.

"One other detail," Jane said. "The Consu pick the combatants from those we bring with us, so protocol requires at least three times the number of selectable combatants. The only exempted member of the delegation is its leader, who is, by courtesy, the one human assumed to be above fighting with Consu criminals and failures."

"Perry, you get to be leader of the delegation," Crick said. "Since you're the one who killed eight thousand of the buggers, by their lights you'd be the natural leader. Also, you're the sole non-Special Forces soldier here, and you lack certain speed and strength modifications the rest of us have. If you were to get picked, you might actually get killed."

"I'm touched you care," I said.

"It's not that," Crick said. "If our star attraction was killed by a lowly criminal, it could jeopardize the chances of getting the Consu to cooperate."

"Okay," I said. "For a second there, I thought you were going soft."

"No chance of that," Crick said. "Now, then. We have forty-three hours until we reach skip distance. There will be forty of us in the delegation, including all platoon and squad leaders. I'll choose the rest from the ranks. That means that each of you will drill your soldiers in hand-to-hand combat between now and then. Perry, I've downloaded the delegation protocols to you; study them and don't screw up. Just after we skip, you and I will meet so I can give you the questions we want to ask, in the order we want to ask them. If we're good, we'll have five questions, but we have to be ready if we need to ask fewer. Let's get to it, people. You're dismissed."

During those forty-three hours, Jane learned about Kathy. Jane would pop into where I was, ask, listen and disappear, off to tend to her duties. It was a strange way to share a life.

"Tell me about her," she asked as I studied the protocol information in a forward lounge.

"I met her when she was in the first grade," I said, and then had to explain what first grade was. Then I told her the first memory I had of Kathy, which was of sharing paste for a construction paper project during the art period the first and second grades shared. How she caught me eating a little of the paste and told me I was gross. How I hit her for saying that, and she decked me in the eye. She got suspended for a day. We didn't speak again until junior high.

"How old are you in the first grade?" she asked.

"Six years old," I said. "As old as you are now."

"Tell me about her," she asked again, a few hours later, in a different place.

"Kathy almost divorced me once," I said. "We had been married for ten years and I had an affair with another woman. When Kathy found out she was furious."

"Why would she care that you had sex with someone else?" Jane asked.

"It wasn't really about the sex," I said. "It was that I lied to her about it. Having sex with someone else only counted as a hormonal weakness in her book. Lying counted as disrespect, and she didn't want to be married to someone who had no respect for her."

"Why didn't you divorce?" Jane asked.

"Because despite the affair, I loved her and she loved me," I said. "We worked it out because we wanted to be together. And anyway, she had an affair a few years later, so I guess you could say we evened up. We actually got along better after that."

"Tell me about her," Jane asked, later.

"Kathy made pies like you wouldn't believe," I told her. "She had this recipe for strawberry rhubarb pie that would knock you on your ass. There was one year where Kathy entered her pie in a state fair contest, and the governor of Ohio was the judge. First prize was a new oven from Sears."

"Did she win?" Jane asked.

"No, she got second, which was a hundred-dollar gift certificate to a bed and bath store. But about a week later she got a phone call from the governor's office. His aide explained to Kathy that for political reasons, he gave the first place award to the wife of an important contributor's best friend, but that ever since the governor had a slice of her pie, he couldn't stop talking about how great it was, so would she please bake another pie for him so he would shut up about the damn pie for once?"

"Tell me about her," Jane asked.

"The first time I knew I was in love with her was my junior year in high school," I said. "Our school was doing a performance of *Romeo and Juliet,* and she was selected as Juliet. I was the play's assistant director, which most of the time meant I was building sets or getting coffee for Mrs. Amos, the teacher who was directing. But when Kathy started having a little trouble with her lines, Mrs. Amos assigned me to go over them with her. So for two weeks after rehearsals, Kathy and I would go over to her house and work on her lines, although mostly we just talked about other things, like teenagers do. It was all very innocent at the time. Then the play went into dress rehearsal and I

heard Kathy speaking all those lines to Jeff Greene, who was playing Romeo. And I got jealous. She was supposed to be speaking those words to *me*."

"What did you do?" Jane asked.

"I moped around through the entire run of the play, which was four performances between Friday night and Sunday afternoon, and avoided Kathy as much as possible. Then at the cast party on Sunday night Judy Jones, who had played Juliet's nurse, found me and told me that Kathy was sitting on the cafeteria loading dock, crying her eyes out. She thought I hated her because I'd been ignoring her for the last four days and she didn't know why. Judy then added if I didn't go out there and tell Kathy I was in love with her, she'd find a shovel and beat me to death with it."

"How did she know you were in love?" Jane asked.

"When you're a teenager and you're in love, it's obvious to everyone but you and the person you're in love with," I said. "Don't ask me why. It just works that way. So I went out to the loading dock, and saw Kathy sitting there, alone, dangling her feet off the edge of the dock. It was a full moon and the light came down on her face, and I don't think I'd ever seen her more beautiful than she was right then. And my heart was bursting because I knew, I *really* knew, that I was so in love with her that I could never tell her how much I wanted her."

"What did you do?" Jane asked.

"I cheated," I said. "Because, you know, I *had* just happened to memorize large chunks of *Romeo and Juliet*. So, as I walked toward her on the loading dock, I spoke most of Act II, Scene II to her. 'But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. Arise fair sun…' and so on. I knew the words before; it's just this time I actually *meant* them. And after I was done saying them, I went to her and I kissed her for the first time. She was fifteen and I was sixteen, and I knew I was going to marry her and spend my life with her."

"Tell me about how she died," Jane asked, just before the skip to Consu space.

"She was making waffles on a Sunday morning, and she had a stroke while she was looking for the vanilla," I said. "I was in the living room

at the time. I remember her asking herself where she had put the vanilla and then a second later I heard a crash and a thump. I ran into the kitchen and she was lying on the floor, shaking and bleeding from where her head had connected with the edge of the counter. I called emergency services as I held her. I tried to stop the bleeding from the cut, and I told her I loved her and kept on telling her that until the paramedics arrived and pulled her away from me, although they let me hold her hand on the ambulance ride to the hospital. I was holding her hand when she died in the ambulance. I saw the light go out in her eyes, but I kept telling her how much I loved her until they took her away from me at the hospital."

"Why did you do that?" Jane asked.

"I needed to be sure that the last thing she heard was me telling her how much I loved her," I said.

"What is it like when you lose someone you love?" Jane asked.

"You die, too," I said. "And you wait around for your body to catch up."

"Is that what you're doing now?" Jane said. "Waiting for your body to catch up, I mean."

"No, not anymore," I said. "You eventually get to live again. You just live a different life, is all."

"So you're on your third life now," Jane said.

"I guess I am," I said.

"How do you like this life?" Jane asked.

"I like it," I said. "I like the people in it."

Out the window, the stars rearranged themselves. We were in Consu space. We sat there quietly, fading in with the silence of the rest of the ship.

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SIXTEEN

"You may refer to me as Ambassador, unworthy though I am of the title," the Consu said. "I am a criminal, having disgraced myself in battle on Pahnshu, and therefore am made to speak to you in your tongue. For this shame I crave death and a term of just punishment before my rebirth. It is my hope that as a result of these proceedings I will be viewed as somewhat less unworthy, and will thus be released to death. It is why I soil myself by speaking to you."

"It's nice to meet you, too," I said.

We stood in the center of a football field–size dome that the Consu had constructed not an hour before. Of course, we humans could not be allowed to touch Consu ground, or be anywhere a Consu might again tread; upon our arrival, automated machines created the dome in a region of Consu space long quarantined to serve as a receiving area for unwelcome visitors such as ourselves. After our negotiations were completed, the dome would be imploded and launched toward the nearest black hole, so that none of its atoms would ever contaminate this particular universe again. I thought that last part was overkill.

"We understand you have questions you wish to ask concerning the Rraey," the ambassador said, "and that you wish to invoke our rites to earn the honor of speaking these questions to us."

"We do," I said. Fifteen meters behind me thirty-nine Special Forces soldiers stood at attention, all dressed for battle. Our information told us that the Consu would not consider this a meeting of equals, so there was little need for diplomatic niceties; also, inasmuch as any of our

people could be selected to fight, they needed to be prepared for battle. I was dressed up a bit, although that was my choice; if I was going to pretend to be the leader of this little delegation, then by God I was at least going to look the part.

At an equal distance behind the Consu were five other Consu, each holding two long and scary-looking knives. I didn't have to ask what they were doing there.

"My great people acknowledge that you have correctly requested our rites and that you have presented yourselves in accordance to our requirements," said the ambassador. "Yet we would have still dismissed your request as unworthy, had you not also brought the one who so honorably dispatched our warriors to the cycle of rebirth. Is that one you?"

"I am he," I said.

The Consu paused and seemed to consider me. "Strange that a great warrior would appear so," the ambassador said.

"I feel that way, too," I said. Our information told us that once the request had been accepted, the Consu would honor it no matter how we comported ourselves at the negotiations, so long as we fought in the accepted fashion. So I felt comfortable being a little flip. The thinking on the matter, in fact, suggested the Consu preferred us that way; it helped reinforce their feelings of superiority. Whatever worked.

"Five criminals have been selected to compete with your soldiers," the ambassador said. "As humans lack the physical attributes of Consu, we have provided knives for your soldiers to use, if they so choose. Our participants have them, and by providing them to one of your soldiers they will choose who they will fight."

"I understand," I said.

"Should your soldier survive, it may keep the knives as a token of its victory," the ambassador said.

"Thanks," I said.

"We would not wish to have them back. They would be unclean," the ambassador said.

"Got it," I said.

"We will answer whatever questions you have earned after the contests," the ambassador said. "We will select opponents now." The

ambassador grunted a shriek that would have shaved pavement off a road, and the five Consu behind him stepped forward, past it and me, and toward our soldiers, knives drawn. Not one flinched. That's discipline.

The Consu didn't spend much time selecting. They went in straight lines and handed the knives to whoever was directly in front of them. To them, one of us was as good as another. Knives were handed to Corporal Mendel, whom I had lunched with, Privates Joe Goodall and Jennifer Aquinas, Sergeant Fred Hawking and Lieutenant Jane Sagan. Wordlessly, each accepted their knives. The Consu retreated behind the ambassador, while the rest of our soldiers stepped back several meters from those who had been selected.

"You will begin each contest," the ambassador said, and then stepped back behind its fighters. Now there was nothing left but me and two lines of fighters fifteen meters from me on either side, patiently waiting to kill each other. I stepped to the side, still between the two rows, and pointed to the soldier and Consu closest to me.

"Begin," I said.

The Consu unfolded its slashing arms, revealing the flattened, razor-sharp blades of modified carapace and freeing again the smaller, almost human secondary arms and hands. It pierced the dome with a screech and stepped forward. Corporal Mendel dropped one of his knives, took the other in his left hand, and started straight at the Consu. When they got within three meters of each other, everything became a blur. Ten seconds after it started, Corporal Mendel had a slash across the length of his rib cage that went down to the bone, and the Consu had a knife jammed deeply into the soft part where its head melded with its carapace. Mendel had gotten his wound as he snuggled into the Consu's grasp, taking the cut for a clear shot at the Consu's most obvious weak spot. The Consu twitched as Mendel tugged the blade around, slicing the creature's nerve cord with a jerk, severing the secondary nerve bundle in the head from the primary brain in the thorax, as well as several major blood vessels. It collapsed. Mendel retrieved his knife and walked back to the rest of the Special Forces, keeping his right arm in to hold his side together.

I signaled Goodall and his Consu. Goodall grinned and danced out, holding his knives low with both hands, blades behind him. His Consu bellowed and charged, head first, slashing arms extended. Goodall returned the charge and then at the last second slid like a base runner on a close play. The Consu slashed down as Goodall slid under it, shaving the skin and ear from the left side of Goodall's head. Goodall lopped off one of the Consu's chitinous legs with a fast upward thrust; it cracked like a lobster claw and skitted off perpendicular to the direction of Goodall's movement. The Consu listed and toppled.

Goodall rotated on his ass, flipped his knives up, did a backward somersault and landed on his feet in time to catch his knives before they came down. The left side of his head was one big gray clot, but Goodall was still smiling as he lunged at his Consu, which was desperately trying to right itself. It flailed at Goodall with its arms too slow as Goodall pirouetted and drove the first knife like a spike into its dorsal carapace with a backward thrust, then reached around and with another backward thrust did the same to the Consu's thoracic carapace. Goodall spun 180 degrees so that he faced toward the Consu, gripped both blade handles and then violently cranked them in a rotating motion. The Consu jerked as the sliced contents of its body fell out in front and behind and then collapsed for a final time. Goodall grinned all the way back to his side, dancing a jig as he went. He'd clearly had fun.

Private Aquinas didn't dance, and she didn't look as if she was having any fun. She and her Consu circled each other warily for a good twenty seconds before the Consu finally lunged, bringing its slashing arm up, as if to hook Aquinas through her gut. Aquinas fell back and lost her balance, fumbling over backward. The Consu jumped her, pinned her left arm by spearing it in the soft gap between the radius and the ulna with its left slashing arm, and brought its other slashing arm up to her neck. The Consu moved its hind legs, positioning itself to provide leverage for a decapitating slash, then moved its right slashing arm slightly to the left, to give itself some momentum.

As the Consu slashed to remove her head, Aquinas grunted mightily and heaved her body in the direction of the cut; her left arm and hand shredded as soft tissues and sinews gave way to the force of her push, and then the Consu rolled as she added her momentum to its.

Inside the grip of the Consu, Aquinas rotated and proceeded to stab hard through the Consu's carapace with her right hand and blade. The Consu tried to push her away; Aquinas wrapped her legs around the creature's midsection and hung in. The Consu got in a few stabs at Aquinas' back before it died, but the slashing arms weren't very effective close in to the Consu's own body. Aquinas dragged herself off the Consu's body and made it halfway toward the other soldiers before she collapsed and had to be carried away.

I now understood why I had been exempted from fighting. It wasn't just a matter of speed and strength, although clearly the Special Forces soldiers outpaced me in both. They employed strategies that came from a different understanding of what was an acceptable loss. A normal soldier would not sacrifice a limb like Aquinas just had; seven decades of the knowledge that limbs were irreplaceable, and that the loss of one could lead to death, worked against it. This wasn't a problem with Special Forces soldiers, who never could not have a limb grown back, and who knew their body's tolerance for damage was so much higher than a normal soldier could appreciate. It's not as if Special Forces soldiers didn't have fear. It just kicked in at a far later time.

I signaled Sergeant Hawking and his Consu to begin. For once, a Consu did not open its slashing arms; this one merely walked forward to the center of the dome and awaited its opponent. Hawking, meanwhile, hunched low and moved forward carefully, a foot at a time, judging the right moment to strike: forward, stop, sidestep, stop, forward, stop and forward again. It was one of those cautious, well-considered tiny forward steps that the Consu lashed out like an exploding bug and impaled Hawking with both slashing arms, hefting him and hurling him into the air. On the downside of his arc, the Consu slashed viciously into him, severing his head and cutting him through the midsection. The torso and legs went in separate directions; the head dropped directly in front of the Consu. The Consu considered it for a moment, then spiked it at the tip of its slashing arm and flung it hard in the direction of the humans. It bounced wetly as it struck the ground and then twirled over their heads, spraying brains and SmartBlood as it went.

During the previous four bouts, Jane had been standing impatiently at the line, flipping her knives in a sort of nervous twitch. Now she stepped forward, ready to begin, as did her opponent, the final Consu. I signaled for the two to start. The Consu took an aggressive step forward, flung its slashing arms wide, and screamed a battle cry that seemed loud enough to shatter the dome and suck us all into space, opening its mandibles extra-wide to do so. Thirty meters away, Jane blinked and then flung one of her knives full force into the open jaw, putting enough force into the throw that the blade went all the way through the back of the Consu's head, the hilt jamming into the far side of the skull carapace. Its dome-shattering battle cry was suddenly and unexpectedly replaced by the sound of a big fat bug choking on blood and a skewer of metal. The thing reached in to dislodge the knife but died before it finished the motion, toppling forward and expiring with a final, wet swallow.

I walked over to Jane. "I don't think you were supposed to use the knives that way," I said.

She shrugged and flipped her remaining knife in her hands. "No one ever said I *couldn't,*" she said.

The Consu ambassador glided forward to me, sidestepping the fallen Consu. "You have won the right to four questions," it said. "You may ask them now."

Four questions were more than we had expected. We had hoped for three, and planned for two; we had expected the Consu to be more of a challenge. Not that one dead soldier and several lopped-off body parts constituted a total victory by any means. Still, you take what you can get. Four questions would be just fine.

"Did the Consu provide the Rraey with the technology to detect skip drives?" I asked.

"Yes," the ambassador said, without elaborating further. Which was fine; we didn't expect the Consu to tell us any more than they had obligated themselves to. But the ambassador's answer gave us information on a number of other questions. Since the Rraey received the technology from the Consu, it was highly unlikely that they knew how it worked on a fundamental level; we didn't have to worry about them expanding their use of it or trading the technology to other races.

"How many skip drive detection units do the Rraey have?" We had originally thought to ask how many of these the Consu provided the Rraey, but on the off chance they made more, we figured it'd be best to be general.

"One," said the ambassador.

"How many other races that humans know of have the ability to detect skip drives?" Our third major question. We assumed that the Consu knew of more races than we did, so asking a more general question of how many races had the technology would be of no use to us; likewise asking them who else they had given the technology to, since some other race could have come up with the technology on its own. Not every piece of tech in the universe is a hand-me-down from some more advanced race. Occasionally people think these things up on their own.

"None," the ambassador said. Another lucky break for us. If nothing else, it gave us some time to figure out how to get around it.

"You still have one more question," Jane said, and pointed me back in the direction of the ambassador, who stood, waiting for my last query. So, I figured, what the hell.

"The Consu can wipe out most of the races in this area of space," I said. "Why don't you?"

"Because we love you," the ambassador said.

"Excuse me?" I said. Technically, this could have qualified as a fifth question, one the Consu was not required to answer. But it did anyway.

"We cherish all life that has the potential for *Ungkat*"—that last part was pronounced like a fender scraping a brick wall—"which is participation in the great cycle of rebirth," the ambassador said. "We tend to you, to all you lesser races, consecrating your planets so that all who dwell there may be reborn into the cycle. We sense our duty to participate in your growth. The Rraey believe we provided them with the technology you question after because they offered up one of their planets to us, but that is not so. We saw the chance to move both of your races closer to perfection, and joyfully we have done so."

The ambassador opened its slashing arms, and we saw its secondary arms, hands open, almost imploring. "The time in which your people will be worthy to join us will be that much closer now. Today you are

unclean and must be reviled even as you are loved. But content yourself in the knowledge that deliverance will one day be at hand. I myself go now to my death, unclean in that I have spoken to you in your tongue, but assured again a place in the cycle because I have moved your people toward their place in the great wheel. I despise you and I love you, you who are my damnation and salvation both. Leave now, so that we may destroy this place, and celebrate your progression. Go."

"I don't like it," Lieutenant Tagore said at our next briefing, after the others and I recounted our experiences. "I don't like it at all. The Consu gave the Rraey that technology specifically so they could fuck with us. That damn bug said so itself. They've got us dancing like puppets on strings. They could be telling the Rraey right now that we're on our way."

"That would be redundant," Captain Jung said, "considering the skip drive detection technology."

"You know what I mean," Tagore shot back. "The Consu aren't going to do us any favors, since they clearly want us and the Rraey to fight, in order to 'progress' to another cosmic level, whatever the fuck *that* means."

"The Consu weren't going to do us any favors anyway, so enough about them," Major Crick said. "We may be moving according to their plans, but remember that their plans happen to coincide with our own up to a point. And I don't think the Consu give a shit whether we or the Rraey come out on top. So let's concentrate on what we're doing instead of what the Consu are doing."

My BrainPal clicked on; Crick sent a graphic of Coral, and another planet, the Rraey homeworld. "The fact that the Rraey are using borrowed technology means we have a chance to act, to hit them fast and hard, both on Coral and at their homeworld," he said. "While we have been chatting up the Consu, the CDF has been moving ships to skip distance. We have six hundred ships—nearly a third of our forces—in position and ready to skip. Upon hearing from us, the CDF will start the clock on simultaneous attacks on Coral and the Rraey homeworld. The idea is both to take back Coral and to pin down

potential Rraey reinforcements. Hitting their homeworld will incapacitate the ships there and force Rraey ships in other parts of space to prioritize between assisting Coral or the Rraey homeworld.

"Both attacks are contingent on one thing: knocking out their ability to know we're coming in. That means taking their tracking station and knocking it offline—but *not* destroying it. The technology in that tracking station is technology the CDF can use. Maybe the Rraey can't figure it out, but we're farther along the technological curve. We blow the station only if there's absolutely no other choice. We're going to take the station and hold it until we can get reinforcements down to the surface."

"How long is that going to take?" asked Jung.

"The simultaneous assaults will be coordinated to begin four hours after we enter Coral space," Crick said. "Depending on the intensity of the ship-to-ship battles, we can expect additional troops to reinforce us sometime after the first couple of hours."

"Four hours after we *enter* Coral space?" Jung asked. "Not after we've taken the tracking station?"

"That's right," Crick said. "So we damn well better take the station, people."

"Excuse me," I said. "I'm troubled by a small detail."

"Yes, Lieutenant Perry," Crick said.

"The success of the offensive attack is predicated on our taking out the tracking station that keeps tabs on our ships coming in," I said.

"Right," said Crick.

"This would be the same tracking station that's going to be tracking *us* when we skip to Coral space," I said.

"Right," said Crick.

"I was on a ship that was tracked as it entered Coral space, if you'll recall," I said. "It was ripped apart and every single person who was on it but me died. Aren't you a little concerned that something very similar will happen to *this* ship?"

"We slid into Coral space undetected before," Tagore said.

"I'm aware of that, since the *Sparrowhawk* was the ship that rescued me," I said. "And believe me, I am grateful. However, that strikes me as the sort of trick you get away with once. And even if we

skip into the Coral system far enough away from the planet to avoid detection, it would take us several hours to reach Coral. The timing is way off for that. If this is going to work, the *Sparrowhawk* has to skip in close to the planet. So I want to know how we're going to do that and still expect the ship to stay in one piece."

"The answer to that is really quite simple," Major Crick said. "We *don't* expect the ship to stay in one piece. We expect it to be blasted right out of the sky. In fact, we're counting on it."

"Pardon me?" I said. I looked around the table, expecting to see looks of confusion similar to the one I was wearing. Instead, everyone was looking somewhat thoughtful. I found this entirely too disturbing.

"High-orbit insertion, then, is it?" asked Lieutenant Dalton.

"Yes," Crick said. "Modified, obviously."

I gaped. "You've done this *before?*" I said.

"Not this exactly, Lieutenant Perry," Jane said, drawing my attention to her. "But yes, on occasion we've inserted Special Forces directly from spacecraft—usually when the use of shuttles is not an option, as it would be here. We have special dropsuits to insulate ourselves from the heat of entering the atmosphere; beyond that it's like any normal airdrop."

"Except that in this case, your ship is being shot out from under you," I said.

"That is the new wrinkle here," Jane admitted.

"You people are absolutely insane," I said.

"It makes for an excellent tactic," Major Crick said. "If the ship is torn apart, bodies are an expected part of the debris. The CDF just dropped a skip drone to us with fresh information on the tracking station's location, so we can skip above the planet in a good position to drop our people. The Rraey will think they've destroyed our assault before it happened. They won't even know we're there until we hit them. And then it will be too late."

"Assuming any of you survive the initial strike," I said.

Crick looked over to Jane and nodded. "The CDF has bought us a little wiggle room," Jane said to the group. "They've begun placing skip drives onto shielded missile clusters and tossing them into Coral space. When their shields are struck they launch the missiles, which are very

hard for the Rraey to hit. We've gotten several Rraey ships over the last two days this way—now they're waiting a few seconds before they fire in order to accurately track anything that's been thrown at them. We should have anywhere from ten to thirty seconds before the *Sparrowhawk* is hit. That's not enough time for a ship that's not expecting the hits to do anything, but for us it's enough time to get our people off the ship. It's also maybe enough time for the bridge crew to launch a distracting offensive attack as well."

"The bridge crew is going to stay on the ship for this?" I asked.

"We'll be suited up with the others and operating the ship via BrainPal," Major Crick said. "But we'll be on the ship at least until our first missile volley is away. We don't want to operate BrainPals once we leave the ship until we're deep in Coral's atmosphere; it would give away the fact we're alive to any Rraey that might be monitoring. There's some risk involved, but there are risks for everyone who is on this ship. Which brings us, incidentally, to you, Lieutenant Perry."

"Me," I said.

"Quite obviously, you're not going to want to be on the ship when it gets hit," Crick said. "At the same time, you haven't trained for this sort of mission, and we also promised you would be here in an advisory capacity. We can't in good conscience ask for you to participate. After this briefing you'll be provided with a shuttle, and a skip drone will be dispatched back to Phoenix with your shuttle's coordinates and a request for retrieval. Phoenix keeps retrieval ships permanently stationed at skip distance; you should be picked up within a day. We'll leave you a month's worth of supplies, however. And the shuttle is equipped with its own emergency skip drones if it comes to that."

"So you're ditching me," I said.

"It's nothing personal," Crick said. "General Keegan will want to have a briefing on the situation and the negotiations with the Consu, and as our liaison with conventional CDF, you're the best person to do both."

"Sir, with your permission, I'd like to remain," I said.

"We really have no place for you, Lieutenant," Crick said. "You'd serve this mission better back on Phoenix."

"Sir, with all due respect, you have at least one hole in your ranks," I said. "Sergeant Hawking died during our negotiations with the Consu; Private Aquinas is missing half her arm. You won't be able to reinforce your ranks prior to your mission. Now, I'm not Special Forces, but I am a veteran soldier. I am, at the very least, better than nothing."

"I seem to recall you calling us all absolutely insane," Captain Jung said to me.

"You *are* all absolutely insane," I said. "So if you're going to pull this off you're going to need all the help you can get. Also, sir," I said, turning to Crick, "remember that I lost my people on Coral. I don't feel right about sitting out this fight."

Crick looked over to Dalton. "Where are we with Aquinas?" he asked.

Dalton shrugged. "We have her on an accelerated healing regimen," he said. "It hurts like a bitch to regrow an arm this fast, but she'll be ready when we make the skip. I don't need him."

Crick turned to Jane, who was staring at me. "It's your call, Sagan," Crick said. "Hawking was your noncom. If you want him, you can have him."

"I *don't* want him," Jane said, looking directly at me as she said it. "But he's right. I'm down a man."

"Fine," Crick said. "Get him up to speed, then." He turned to me. "If Lieutenant Sagan thinks you're not going to cut it, you're getting stuffed in a shuttle. Do you get me?"

"I get you, Major," I said, staring back at Jane.

"Good," he said. "Welcome to Special Forces, Perry. You're the first realborn we've ever had in our ranks, so far as I know. Try not to fuck up, because if you do, I promise you the Rraey are going to be the least of your problems."

Jane entered my stateroom without my permission; she could do that now that she was my superior officer.

"What the fuck do you think you are doing?" she said.

"You people are down a man," I said. "I'm a man. Do the math."

"I got you on this ship because I knew you'd be put on the shuttle," Jane said. "If you were rotated back into the infantry, you'd be on one of the ships involved in the assault. If we don't take the tracking station, you know what's going to happen to those ships and everyone in them. This was the only way I knew I was going to keep you safe, and you just threw it away."

"You could have told Crick you didn't want me," I said. "You heard him. He'd be happy to kick me into a shuttle and leave me floating in Consu space until someone got around to picking me up. You didn't because you know how fucking crazy this little plan is. You know you're going to need all the help you can get. I didn't know it was *you* I'd be under, you know, Jane. If Aquinas wasn't going to be ready, I could just as easily be serving under Dalton for this mission. I didn't even know Hawking was your noncom until Crick said something about it. All I know was that if this thing is going to work, you need everyone you've got."

"Why do you care?" Jane said. "This isn't your mission. You're not one of us."

"I'm one of you right now, aren't I?" I said. "I'm on this ship. I'm here, thanks to you. And I don't have anywhere else to be. My entire company got blown up and most of my other friends are dead. And anyway, as one of *you* mentioned, we're all human. Shit, I was even grown in a lab, just like you. This body was, at least. I might as well be one of you. So now I am."

Jane flared. "You have *no* idea what it's like to be one of us," she said. "You said you wanted to know about me. What part do you want to know? Do you want to know what it's like to wake up one day, your head filled with a library full of information—everything from how to butcher a pig to how to pilot a starship—but not to know your own name? Or that you even have one? Do you want to know what it's like never to have been a child, or even to have *seen* one until you step foot on some burned-out colony and see a dead one in front of you? Maybe you'd like to hear about how the first time any of us talk to a realborn we have to keep from hitting you because you speak so slow, move so slow and *think* so fucking slow that we don't know why they even bother to enlist you.

"Or maybe you'd like to know that every single Special Forces soldier dreams up a past for themselves. We know we're the Frankenstein monster. We know we're put together from bits and pieces of the dead. We look in a mirror and we know we're seeing somebody else, and that the only reason we exist is because they *don't*—and that they are lost to us forever. So we all imagine the person they could have been. We imagine their lives, their children, their husbands and wives, and we know that *none of these things can ever be ours*."

Jane stepped over and got right in my face. "Do you want to know what it's like to meet the husband of the woman you used to be? To see recognition in his face but not to feel it yourself, no matter how much you want to? To know he so desperately wants to call you a name that isn't yours? To know that when he looks at you he sees decades of life—and that you know none of it. To know he'd been with you, been *inside* of you, was there holding your hand when you died, telling you that he loved you. To know he can't make you realborn, but can give you continuation, a history, an idea of who you were to help you understand who you are. Can you even imagine what it's like to want that for yourself? To keep it safe at any cost?"

Closer. Lips almost touching mine, but no hint of a kiss in them. "You lived with me ten times longer than *I've* lived with me," Jane said. "You are the keeper of me. You can't imagine what that's like for me. Because you're *not one of us.*" She stepped back.

I stared as she stepped back. "You're not her," I said. "You said it to me yourself."

"Oh, Christ," Jane snapped. "I *lied*. I *am* her, and you know it. If she had lived, she'd have joined the CDF and they would have used the same goddamned DNA to make her new body as they made me with. I've got souped-up alien shit in my genes but you're not fully human anymore either, and she wouldn't be either. The human part of me is the same as what it would be in her. All I'm missing is the memory. All I'm missing is my entire other life."

Jane came back to me again, cupped my face with her hand. "I am Jane Sagan, I know that," she said. "The last six years are mine, and they're real. This is *my* life. But I'm Katherine Perry, too. I want that

life back. The only way I can have it is through you. You have to stay alive, John. Without you, I lose myself again."

I reached up to her hand. "Help me stay alive," I said. "Tell me everything I need to know to do this mission well. Show me everything I need to help your platoon do its job. Help me to help you, Jane. You're right, I don't know what it's like to be you, to be one of you. But I do know I don't want to be floating around in a damned shuttle while you're getting shot at. I need you to stay alive, too. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," she said. I took her hand and kissed it.

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SEVENTEEN

This is the easy part—Jane sent to me. *Just lean into it*.

The bay doors were blown open, an explosive decompression that mirrored my previous arrival into Coral space. I was going to have to come here one time without being flung out of a cargo bay. This time, however, the bay was clear of dangerous, untethered objects; the only objects in the *Sparrowhawk*'s hold were its crew and soldiers, decked out in airtight, bulky jumpsuits. Our feet were nailed to the floor, so to speak, by electromagnetic tabs, but just as soon as the cargo bay doors were blasted away and a sufficient distance to keep from killing any of us, the tabs would cut out and we'd tumble out the door, carried away by the escaping air—the cargo bay being overpressurized to make sure there'd still be enough lift.

There was. Our toe magnets cut out, and it was like being yanked by a giant through a particularly large mouse hole. As Jane suggested, I leaned into it, and suddenly found myself tumbling into space. This was fine, since we wanted to give the appearance of sudden, unexpected exposure to the nothingness of space, just in case the Rraey were watching. I was unceremoniously bowled out the door with the rest of the Special Forces, had a sickening moment of vertigo as *out* reoriented as *down,* and *down* was two hundred klicks toward the darkened mass of Coral, the terminal of day blistering east of where we were going to end up.

My personal rotation turned me just in time to see the *Sparrowhawk* exploding in four places, the fireballs originating on the

far side of the ship from me and silhouetting the ship in flame. No sound or heat, thanks to the vacuum between me and the ship, but obscene orange and yellow fireballs made up visually for the lack in other senses. Miraculously, as I turned, I saw the *Sparrowhawk* fire missiles, launching out toward a foe whose position I could not register. Somebody was still on the ship when it got hit. I rotated again, in time to see the *Sparrowhawk* crack in two as another volley of missiles hit. Whoever was in the ship was going to die in it. I hoped the missiles they launched hit home.

I was falling alone toward Coral. Other soldiers might have been near me, but it was impossible to tell; our suits were nonreflective and we were ordered on BrainPal silence until we had cleared through the upper part of Coral's atmosphere. Unless I caught a glimpse of someone occluding a star, I wouldn't know they were there. It pays to be inconspicuous when you are planning to assault a planet, especially when someone above may still be looking for you. I fell some more and watched the planet of Coral steadily eat the stars on its growing periphery.

My BrainPal chimed; it was time for shielding. I signaled assent, and from a pack on my back a stream of nanobots flowed. An electromagnetic netting of the 'bots was weaved around me, sealing me in a matte-black globe and shutting out light. Now I was truly falling in darkness. I thanked God I was not naturally claustrophobic; if I were, I might be going bugshit at this moment.

The shielding was the key to the high-orbit insertion. It protected the soldier inside from the body-charring heat generated by entering the atmosphere in two ways. First, the shielding sphere was created while the soldier was still falling through vacuum, which lessened the heat transfer unless the soldier somehow touched the skin of the shield, which was in contact with the atmosphere. To avoid this, the same electromagnetic scaffolding that 'bots constructed the shield on also pinned the soldier in the center of the sphere, clamping down on movement. It wasn't very comfortable, but neither was burning up as air molecules ripped into your flesh at high speeds.

The 'bots took the heat, used some of the energy to strengthen the electromagnetic net that isolated the soldier, and then passed off as

much of the rest of the heat as possible. They'd burn up eventually, at which point another 'bot would come up through the netting to take its place. Ideally, you ran out of the need for the shield before you ran out of shield. Our allotment of 'bots was calibrated for Coral's atmosphere, with a little extra wiggle room. But you can't help being nervous.

I felt vibration as my shield began to plow through Coral's upper atmosphere; Asshole rather unhelpfully chimed in that we had begun to experience turbulence. I rattled around in my little sphere, the isolating field holding but allowing more sway than I would have liked. When the edge of a sphere can transmit a couple thousand degrees of heat directly onto your flesh, any movement toward it, no matter how small, is a cause for concern.

Down on the surface of Coral, anyone who looked up would see hundreds of meteors suddenly streaking through the night; any suspicions of the contents of these meteors would be mitigated by the knowledge that they were most likely chunks of the human spacecraft the Rraey forces had just blasted out of the sky. Hundreds of thousands of feet up, a falling soldier and a falling piece of hull look the same.

The resistance of a thickening atmosphere did its work and slowed down my sphere; several seconds after it stopped glowing from the heat, it collapsed entirely and I burst through it like a new chick launched by slingshot from its shell. The view now was not of a blank black wall of 'bots but of a darkened world, lit in just a few places by bioluminescent algae, which highlighted the languid contours of the coral reefs, and then by the harsher lights of Rraey encampments and former human settlements. We'd be heading for the second sort of lights.

BrainPal discipline up—sent Major Crick, and I was surprised; I figured he had gone down with the *Sparrowhawk. Platoon leaders identify; soldiers form up on platoon leaders*—

About a klick to the west of me and a few hundred meters above, Jane suddenly lit up. She had not painted herself in neon in real life; that would have been a fine way to be killed by ground forces. It was simply my BrainPal's way of showing me where she was. Around me, close in and in the distance, other soldiers began to glow; my new platoon mates, showing themselves as well. We twisted ourselves in the

air and began to drift together. As we moved, the surface of Coral transformed with a topological grid overlay on which several pinpoints glowed, clustered tightly together: the tracking station and its immediate environs.

Jane began to flood her soldiers with information. Once I had joined Jane's platoon, the Special Forces soldiers stopped the courtesy of speaking to me, reverting to their usual method of BrainPal communication. If I was going to fight with them, they figured, I had to do it on their terms. The last three days had been a communication blur; when Jane said that realborn communicated at a slower speed, it was an understatement of the case. Special Forces zapped each other messages faster than I could blink. Conversations and debates would be over faster than I could grasp the first message. Most confusingly of all, Special Forces didn't limit their transmissions to text or verbal messages. They utilized the BrainPal ability to transmit emotional information to send bursts of emotion, using them like a writer uses punctuation. Someone would tell a joke and everyone who heard it would laugh with their BrainPal, and it was like being hit with little BBs of amusement, tunneling in your skull. It gave me a headache.

But it really was a more efficient way to "speak." Jane was outlining our platoon's mission, objectives and strategy in about a tenth of the time a briefing would take a commander in the conventional CDF. This is a real bonus when you're conducting your briefing as you and your soldiers fall toward the surface of a planet at terminal velocity. Amazingly, I was able to follow the briefing almost as fast as Jane reeled it off. The secret, I found, was to stop fighting it or attempt to organize the information the way I was used to getting it, in discrete chunks of verbal speech. Just accept you're drinking from the fire hose and open wide. It also helped that I didn't talk back much.

The tracking station was located on high ground near one of the smaller human settlements that the Rraey had occupied, in a small valley closed off at the end where the station lay. The ground was originally occupied by the settlement's command center and its outlying buildings; the Rraey had set up there to take advantage of the power lines and to cannibalize the command center's computing, transmitting and other resources. The Rraey had created defensive

positions on and around the command center, but real-time imaging from the site (provided by a member of Crick's command team, who had basically strapped a spy satellite onto her chest) showed that these positions were only moderately armed and staffed. The Rraey were overconfident that their technology and their spaceships would neutralize any threat.

Other platoons would take the command center, locate and secure the machines that integrated the tracking information from the satellites and prepared it for upload to the Rraey spaceships above. Our platoon's job was to take the transmission tower from which the ground signal went to the ships. If the transmission hardware was advanced Consu equipment, we were to take the tower offline and defend it against the inevitable Rraey counterattack; if it was just off-the-shelf Rraey technology, we simply got to blow it up.

Either way, the tracking station would be down and the Rraey spaceships would be flying blind, unable to track when and where our ships would appear. The tower was set away from the main command center and fairly heavily guarded relative to the rest of the area, but we had plans to thin out the herd before we even hit the ground.

Select targets—Jane sent, and an overlay of our target area zoomed up on our BrainPals. Rraey soldiers and their machines glowed in infrared; with no perceived threat, they had no heat discipline. By squads, teams and then by individual soldiers targets were selected and prepared. Whenever possible we opted to hit the Rraey and not their equipment, which we could use ourselves after the Rraey were dealt with. Guns don't kill people, the aliens behind the triggers do. With targets selected, we all drifted slightly apart from each other; all that was left to do was wait until one klick.

One klick—one thousand meters up, our remaining 'bots deployed to a maneuverable parasail, arresting the speed of our descent with a stomach-churning yank, but allowing us to bob and weave on the way down and avoid each other as we went. Our sails, like our combat wear, were camouflaged against dark and heat. Unless you knew what you were looking for, you'd never see us coming.

Take out targets—Major Crick sent, and the silence of our descent ended in the tearing rattle of Empees unloading a downpour of metal.

On the ground, Rraey soldiers and personnel unexpectedly had heads and limbs blasted away from their bodies; their companions had only a fraction of a second to register what had happened before the same fate was visited on them. In my case I targeted three Rraey stationed near the transmission tower; the first two went down without a peep; the third swung its weapon out into the darkness and prepared to fire. It was of the opinion I was in front rather than above. I tapped it before it had a chance to correct that assessment. In about five seconds, every Rraey who was outside and visible was down and dead. We were still several hundred meters up when it happened.

Floodlights came on and were shot out as soon as they blazed to life. We pumped rockets into entrenchments and foxholes, splattering Rraey who were sitting in them. Rraey soldiers streaming out of the command center and encampments followed the rocket trails back up and fired; the soldiers had long since maneuvered out of the way, and were now picking off the Rraey who were firing out in the open.

I targeted a landing spot near the transmission tower and instructed Asshole to compute an evasive maneuvering path down to it. As I came in, two Rraey burst through the door of a shack next to the tower, firing up in my general direction as they ran in the direction of the command center. One I shot in the leg; it went down, screeching. The other stopped firing and ran, using the Rraey's muscular, birdlike legs to pick up distance. I signaled for Asshole to release the parasail; it dissolved as the electrostatic filaments holding it together collapsed and the 'bots transformed into inert dust. I fell the several meters to the ground, rolled, came up and sighted the rapidly receding Rraey. It was favoring a fast, straight line of escape rather than a shifting, broken run that would have made it more difficult to target. A single shot, center mass, brought it down. Behind me, the other Rraey was still screeching, and then suddenly wasn't as an abrupt burp sounded. I turned and saw Jane behind me, her Empee still angling down toward the Rraey corpse.

You're with me—she sent and signaled me toward the shack. On our way in two more Rraey came through the door, sprinting, while a third laid down fire from inside the shack. Jane dropped to the ground and returned fire while I went after the fleeing Rraey. These ones were running broken paths; I got one but the other got away, pratfalling over

an embankment to do so. Meanwhile, Jane had got tired of volleying with the Rraey in the shed and shot a grenade into the shack; there was a muffled squawk and then a loud bang, followed by large chunks of Rraey flopping out of the door.

We advanced and entered the shack, which was covered with the rest of the Rraey and housed a bank of electronics. A BrainPal scan confirmed it as Rraey communication equipment; this was the operation center for the tower. Jane and I backed out and pumped rockets and grenades into the shack. It blew up pretty; the tower was now offline, although there was still the actual transmission equipment at the top of the tower to deal with.

Jane got status reports from her squad leaders; the tower and surrounding areas were taken. The Rraey never got it together after the initial targeting. Our casualties were light, with no deaths to report in the platoon. The other phases of the attack were also going well; the most intense combat coming from the command center, in which the soldiers were going from room to room, blasting the Rraey as they went. Jane sent in two squads to reinforce the command center effort, had another squad police Rraey corpses and equipment at the tower, and had another two squads create a perimeter.

And you—she said, turning to me and pointing to the tower. *Climb up there and tell me what we've got.*

I glanced up at the tower, which was your typical radio tower: About 150 meters high and not much of anything besides the metal scaffolding holding up whatever it was at the top. It was the most impressive thing about the Rraey so far. The tower hadn't been here when the Rraey had arrived, so they must have put it up almost instantly. It was just a radio tower, but on the other hand, you try putting up a radio tower in a day and see how you do. The tower had spikes forming a ladder leading up toward the top; Rraey physiology and height were close enough to humans that I could use it. Up I went.

At the top was some dangerous wind and a car-size bundle of antennae and instrumentation. I scanned it with Asshole, who compared the visual image with its library of Rraey technology. It was all Rraey, all the time. Whatever information was being piped down from the satellites was being processed down at the command center. I

hoped they managed to take the command center without accidentally blowing the stuff up.

I passed along the information to Jane. She informed me that the sooner I got down from the tower, the better chance I had of not getting crushed by debris. I didn't need further convincing. As I got down, rockets launched over my head directly into the instrument package at the top of the tower. The force of the blast caused the tower's stabilizing cables to snap with a metallic *tang* that promised beheading power to any who might have been in their path. The entire tower swayed. Jane ordered the tower base struck; the rockets tore into the metal beams. The tower twisted and collapsed, groaning all the way down.

From the command center area, the sounds of combat had stopped and there was sporadic cheering; whatever Rraey there were, were now gone. I had Asshole bring up my internal chronometer. It had not been quite ninety minutes since we hurled ourselves out of the *Sparrowhawk*.

"They had no idea we were coming," I said to Jane, and was suddenly surprised at the sound of my own voice.

Jane looked at me, nodded, and then looked over to the tower. "They didn't. That was the good news. The bad news is, now they know we're here. This was the easy part. The hard part is coming up."

She turned and started shooting commands to her platoon. We were expecting a counterattack. A big one.

"Do you want to be human again?" Jane asked me. It was the evening before our landing. We were in the mess area, picking at food.

"Again?" I said, smiling.

"You know what I mean," she said. "Back into a real human body. No artificial additives."

"Sure," I said. "I've only got eight-some-odd years left to go. Assuming I'm still alive, I'll retire and colonize."

"It means going back to being weak and slow," Jane said, with usual Special Forces tact.

"It's not *that* bad," I said. "And there are other compensations. Children, for example. Or the ability to meet others and not have to subsequently kill them because they are the alien enemies of the colonies."

"You'll get old again and die," Jane said.

"I suppose I will," I said. "That's what humans do. This"—I held up a green arm—"isn't the usual thing, you know. And as far as dying goes, in any given year of CDF life, I'm far more likely to die than if I were a colonist. Actuarially speaking, being an unmodified human colonist is the way to go."

"You're not dead yet," Jane said.

"People seem to be looking out for me," I said. "What about you? Any plans to retire and colonize?"

"Special Forces don't retire," Jane said.

"You mean you're not allowed?" I asked.

"No, we're allowed," Jane said. "Our term of service is ten years, just like yours, although with us there's no possibility of our term lasting any less than the full ten years. We just don't retire, is all."

"Why not?" I asked.

"We don't have any experience being anything else than what we are," Jane said. "We're born, we fight, that's what we do. We're good at what we do."

"Don't you ever want to stop fighting?" I asked.

"Why?" Jane asked.

"Well, for one thing, it dramatically cuts down your chances of violent death," I said. "For another thing, it'd give you a chance to live those lives you all dream about. You know, the pasts you make up for yourselves. Us normal CDF get to have that life before we go into the service. You could have it afterward."

"I wouldn't know what to do with myself," Jane said.

"Welcome to the human race," I said. "So you're saying no Special Forces people leave the service? Ever?"

"I've known one or two," Jane admitted. "But only a couple."

"What happened to them?" I asked. "Where did they go?"

"I'm not really sure," Jane said, vaguely. Then, "Tomorrow I want you to stick by me."

"I understand," I said.

"You're still too slow," Jane said. "I don't want you to interfere with my other people."

"Thanks," I said.

"I'm sorry," Jane said. "I realize that wasn't very tactful. But you've led soldiers. You know what my concern is. I'm willing to assume the risks involved in having you around. Others shouldn't have to."

"I know," I said. "I'm not offended. And don't worry. I'll carry my own weight. I plan to retire, you know. I have to stay alive a little bit longer to do that."

"Good that you have motivations," Jane said.

"I agree," I said. "You should think about retiring yourself. As you say, it's good to have a motivation to stay alive."

"I don't want to be dead," Jane said. "It's motivation enough."

"Well," I said, "if you ever change your mind, I'll send you a postcard from wherever I retire. Come join me. We can live on a farm. Plant some chickens. Raise some corn."

Jane snorted. "You can't be serious," she said.

"Actually, I am," I said, and I realized that I was.

Jane was silent for a moment, then said, "I don't like farming."

"How would you know?" I said. "You've never done it."

"Did Kathy like to farm?" Jane said.

"Not in the least," I said. "She barely had the tolerance to keep a garden going."

"Well, there you have it, then," Jane said. "Precedent is working against me."

"Give it some thought, anyway," I said.

"Maybe I will," Jane said.

Where the hell did I put that ammo clip—Jane sent, and then the rockets hit. I threw myself down to the ground as rock from Jane's position on the outcropping showered around me. I looked up and saw Jane's hand, twitching. I started up toward her, but was held back by a spray of fire. I wheeled backward and got back behind the rock where I had been positioned.

I looked down at the team of Rraey that had blindsided us; two of them were moving slowly up the hill toward us, while a third was helping a final one load another rocket. I had no doubts where that one was headed. I flipped a grenade toward the two advancing Rraey and heard them scrambling for cover. When it went off I ignored them and took a shot at the Rraey with the rocket. It went down with a thud and triggered its rocket with an expiring twitch; the blast scorched the face of its companion Rraey, who screamed and flailed about, clutching at its eyeband. I shot it in the head. The rocket arced up and away, far from me. I didn't bother to wait to see where it landed.

The two Rraey who had been advancing on my position started to scramble back up; I launched another grenade in their general direction to keep them busy and headed to Jane. The grenade landed directly at the feet of one of the Rraey and proceeded to take those feet off; the second Rraey dove back to the ground. I launched a second grenade at that one. He didn't avoid that one fast enough.

I kneeled over Jane, who was still twitching, and saw the chunk of rock that had penetrated the side of her head. SmartBlood was rapidly clotting, but small spurts were leaking out at the edges. I spoke to Jane, but she didn't respond. I accessed her BrainPal, to erratic emotional blips of shock and pain. Her eyes scanned sightlessly. She was going to die. I clutched her hand and tried to calm the sickening rush of vertigo and déjà vu.

The counterattack had begun at dawn, not long after we took the tracking station, and it had been more than heavy; it had been ferocious. The Rraey, realizing their protection had been ripped away, had struck back hard to reclaim the tracking station. Their attack was haphazard, belying the lack of time and planning, but it was relentless. Troopship after troopship floated over the horizon, bringing more Rraey into combat.

The Special Forces soldiers used their special blend of tactics and insanity to greet the first of these troopships with teams racing to meet the ships as they landed, firing rockets and grenades into the troop bays the moment the landing doors opened. The Rraey finally added air support and troops began landing without being blown up the moment they touched down. While the bulk of our forces were defending the

command center and the Consu technological prize it hid, our platoon had been roaming the periphery, harassing the Rraey and making their forward progress that much more difficult. It's why Jane and I were on the outcropping of rock, several hundred meters from the command center.

Directly below our position, another team of Rraey were beginning to pick their way toward us. It was time to move. I launched two rockets at the Rraey to stall them, then bent down and grabbed Jane in a fireman's carry. Jane moaned, but I couldn't worry about that. I spotted a boulder Jane and I had used on our way out and launched myself toward it. Behind me, the Rraey took aim. Shots whipped by; shattered rock cut at my face. I made it behind the boulder, set Jane down, pumped a grenade in the Rraey's direction. As it went off, I ran out from behind the boulder and leaped at their position, covering much of the distance in two long strides. The Rraey squawked; they didn't quite know what to do with the human launching itself directly at them. I switched my Empee to automatic fire and got them at close range before they could get themselves organized. I hurried back to Jane and accessed her BrainPal. Still there. Still alive.

The next leg of our journey was going to be difficult; about a hundred meters of open ground lay between me and where I wanted to be, a small maintenance garage. Rraey infantry lines bordered the field; a Rraey aircraft was heading in the general direction I wanted to go, looking for humans to shoot. I accessed Asshole to locate the positions of Jane's people and found three near me: two on my side of the field, thirty meters away, and another on the other side. I gave them the order to cover me, grabbed Jane again and sprinted toward the shed.

The air erupted in gunfire. Turf jumped up at me as shots buried themselves into the ground where my feet had been or would be. I was hit with a glancing blow to my left hip; my lower half torqued as pain flashed through my side. That was going to leave a bruise. I managed to keep my footing and kept running. Behind me I could hear the crumpled thump of rockets impacting on Rraey positions. The cavalry had arrived.

The Rraey airship turned to get a shot at me, then swerved to avoid the rocket launched at it from one of our soldiers. It accomplished this,

but wasn't so lucky at avoiding the other two rockets bearing down on it from the other direction. The first crashed into its engine; the second into the windshield. The aircraft dipped and listed, but remained aloft long enough to get kissed by a final rocket that lodged itself in the shattered windshield and erupted into the cockpit. The aircraft collapsed into the ground with a shuddering rumble as I made it to the shed. Behind me, the Rraey who had been targeting me turned their attention to Jane's people, who were causing them far more damage than I was. I tore open the door to the shed and slid myself and Jane into the recessed repair bay inside.

In the relative calm I reassessed Jane's vitals. The wound in her head was completely caked over with SmartBlood; it was impossible to see how much damage there was or how deep the rock fragments went into her brain. Her pulse was strong but her breathing was shallow and erratic. This is where the extra oxygen-carrying capacity of SmartBlood was going to come in handy. I was no longer certain she was going to die, but I didn't know what I could do to keep her alive on my own.

I accessed Asshole for options, and one was produced: the command center had housed a small infirmary. Its accommodations were modest but featured a portable stasis chamber. It would keep Jane stable until she could make it onto one of the ships and back to Phoenix for medical attention. I recalled how Jane and the crew of the *Sparrowhawk* stuffed me into a stasis chamber after my first trip to Coral. It was time to return the favor.

A series of bullets whined through a window above me; someone had remembered I was there. Time to move again. I plotted my next sprint, to a Rraey-built trench fifty meters in front of me, now occupied by Special Forces. I let them know I was coming; they obligingly laid down suppressing fire as I ran brokenly toward them. With that I was behind Special Forces lines again. The remainder of the trip to the command center proceeded with minimal drama.

I arrived just in time for the Rraey to begin lobbing shells at the command center. They were no longer interested in taking back their tracking station; now they were intent on destroying it. I looked up at the sky. Even through the brightness of the morning sky, sparkling

flashes of light glistened through the blue. The Colonial fleet had arrived.

The Rraey weren't going to take very long to demolish the command center, taking the Consu technology with it. I didn't have very much time. I ducked into the building and ran for the infirmary as everyone else was streaming out.

There was something big and complicated in the command center infirmary. It was the Consu tracking system. God only knows why the Rraey decided to house it there. But they did. As a result, the infirmary was the one room in the entire command center that wasn't all shot up; Special Forces were under orders to take the tracking system in one piece. Our boys and girls attacked the Rraey in this room with flash grenades and knives. The Rraey were still there, stab wounds and all, splayed out on the floor.

The tracking system hummed, almost contentedly, flat and featureless, against the infirmary wall. The only sign of input/ output capability was a small monitor and an access spindle for a Rraey memory module lying haphazardly on a hospital bedside table next to the tracking system. The tracking system had no idea that in just a couple of minutes it was going to be nothing more than a bundle of broken wiring, thanks to an upcoming Rraey shell. All our work in securing the damn thing was going to go to waste.

The command center rattled. I stopped thinking about the tracking system and placed Jane gently on an infirmary bed, then looked around for the stasis chamber. I found it in an adjoining storeroom; it looked like a wheelchair encased in a half cylinder of plastic. I found two portable power sources on the shelf next to the stasis chamber; I plugged one into the chamber and read the diagnostic panel. Good for two hours. I grabbed another one. Better safe than sorry.

I wheeled the stasis chamber over to Jane as another shell hit, this one shaking the entire command center and knocking out the power. I was pushed sideways by the hit, slipped on a Rraey body and cracked my head on the wall on the way down. A flash of light pulsed behind

my eyes and then an intense pain. I cursed as I righted myself, and felt a small ooze of SmartBlood from a scrape on my forehead.

The lights flicked on and off for a few seconds, and in between those few flickers Jane sent a rush of emotional information so intense I had to grab the wall to steady myself. Jane was awake; aware and in those few seconds I saw what she thought she saw. Someone else was in the room with her, looking just like her, her hands touching the sides of Jane's face as she smiled at her. Flicker, flicker, and she looked like she looked the last time I saw her. The light flickered again, came on for good, and the hallucination went away.

Jane twitched. I went over to her; her eyes were open and looking directly at me. I accessed her BrainPal; Jane was still conscious, but barely.

"Hey," I said softly, and took her hand. "You've been hit, Jane. You're okay now, but I need to put you in this stasis chamber until we can get you some help. You saved me once, remember. So we're even after this. Just hold on, okay?"

Jane gripped my hand, weakly, as if to get my attention. "I saw her," she said, whispering. "I saw Kathy. She spoke to me."

"What did she say?" I asked.

"She said," Jane said, and then drifted a little before focusing in on me again. "She said I should go farming with you."

"What did you say to that?" I asked.

"I said okay," Jane said.

"Okay," I said.

"Okay," Jane said and slipped away again. Her BrainPal feed showed erratic brain activity; I picked her up and gently as possible placed her in the stasis chamber. I gave her a kiss and turned it on. The chamber sealed and hummed; Jane's neural and physiological indices slowed to a crawl. She was ready to roll. I looked down at the wheels to navigate them around the dead Rraey I'd stepped on a few minutes before and noticed the memory module poking out of the Rraey's abdomen pouch.

The command center rattled again with a hit. Against my better judgment I reached down, grabbed the memory module, walked over to the access spindle, and slammed it in. The monitor came to life and

showed a listing of files in Rraey script. I opened a file and was treated to a schematic. I closed it and opened another file. More schematics. I went back to the original listing and looked at the graphic interface to see if there was a top-level category access. There was; I accessed it and had Asshole translate what I was seeing.

What I was seeing was an owner's manual for the Consu tracking system. Schematics, operating instructions, technical settings, troubleshooting procedures. It was all there. It was the next best thing to having the system itself.

The next shell broadsided the command center, knocked me square on my ass, and sent shrapnel tearing through the infirmary. A chunk of metal made a gaping hole through the monitor I was looking at; another punched a hole through the tracking system itself. The tracking system stopped humming and began making choking sounds; I grabbed the memory module, pulled it off the spindle, grabbed the stasis chamber's handles and ran. We were a barely acceptable distance away when a final shell plowed through the command center, collapsing the building entirely.

In front of us, the Rraey were retreating; the tracking station was the least of their problems now. Overhead, dozens of descending dark points spoke of landing shuttles, filled with CDF soldiers itching to take back the planet. I was happy to let them. I wanted to get off this rock as soon as possible.

In the near distance Major Crick was conferring with some of his staff; he motioned me over. I wheeled Jane to him. He glanced down at her, and then up at me.

"They tell me you sprinted the better part of a klick with Sagan on your back, and then went into the command center when the Rraey began shelling," Crick said. "Yet I seem to recall *you* were the one who called *us* insane."

"I'm not insane, sir," I said. "I have a finely calibrated sense of acceptable risk."

"How is she?" Crick asked, nodding to Jane.

"She's stable," I said. "But she has a pretty serious head wound. We need to get her into a medical bay as soon as possible."

Crick nodded over to a landing shuttle. “That’s the first transport,” he said. “You’ll both be on it.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

“Thank *you*, Perry,” Crick said. “Sagan is one of my best officers. I’m grateful you saved her. Now, if you could have managed to save that tracking system, too, you would really have made my day. All this work defending the goddamn tracking station was for nothing.”

“About that, sir,” I said, and held up the memory module. “I think I have something you might find interesting.”

Crick stared at the memory module, and then scowled over at me. “No one likes an overachiever, Captain,” he said.

“No, sir, I guess they don’t,” I said, “although it’s lieutenant.”

“We’ll just see about that,” Crick said.

Jane made the first shuttle up. I was delayed quite a bit.

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EIGHTEEN

I made captain. I never saw Jane again.

The first of these was the more dramatic of the two.

Carrying Jane to safety on my back through several hundred meters of open battlefield, and then placing her into a stasis chamber while under fire, would have been enough to get a decent write-up in the official report of the battle.

Bringing in the technical schematics for the Consu tracking system as well, as Major Crick intimated, seemed a little like piling on. But what are you going to do. I got a couple more medals out of the Second Battle of Coral, and the promotion to boot. If anybody noticed that I had gone from corporal to captain in under a month, they kept it to themselves. Well, so did I. In any event, I got my drinks bought for me for several months afterward. Of course, when you're in the CDF, all the drinks are free. But it's the thought that counts.

The Consu technical manual was shipped directly to Military Research. Harry told me later that getting to flip through it was like reading God's scribble pad. The Rraey knew how to use the tracking system but had no idea how it worked—even with the full schematic it was doubtful that they would have been able to piece together another one. They didn't have the manufacturing capability to do it. We knew that because *we* didn't have the manufacturing capability to do it. The theory behind the machine alone was opening up whole new branches of physics, and causing the colonies to reassess their skip drive technology.

Harry was tapped as part of the team tasked to spin out practical applications of the technology. He was delighted with the position; Jesse complained it was making him insufferable. Harry's old gripe about not having the math for the job was rendered immaterial, since no one else really had the math for it, either. It certainly reinforced the idea that the Consu were a race with whom we should clearly not mess.

A few months after the Second Battle of Coral, it was rumored that the Rraey returned to Consu space, imploring the Consu for more technology. The Consu responded by imploding the Rraey's ship and hurling it into the nearest black hole. This still strikes me as overkill. But it's just a rumor.

After Coral, the CDF gave me a series of cushy assignments, beginning with a stint touring the colonies as the CDF's latest hero, showing the colonists how The Colonial Defense Forces Are Fighting For YOU! I got to sit in a lot of parades and judge a lot of cooking contests. After a few months of that I was ready to do something else, although it was finally nice to be able to visit a planet or two and not have to kill everyone who was there.

After my PR stint, the CDF had me ride herd on new recruit transport ships. I was the guy who got to stand in front of a thousand old people in new bodies and tell them to have fun, and then a week later tell them that in ten years, three-quarters of them would be dead. This tour of duty was almost unbearably bittersweet. I'd go into the dining hall on the transport ship and see groups of new friends coalescing and bonding, the way I did with Harry and Jesse, Alan and Maggie, Tom and Susan. I wondered how many of them would make it. I hoped all of them would. I knew that most of them wouldn't. After a few months of this I asked for a different assignment. Nobody said anything about it. It wasn't the sort of assignment that anyone wanted to do for a very long time.

Eventually I asked to go back into combat. It's not that I like combat, although I'm strangely good at it. It's just that in this life, I am a soldier. It was what I agreed to be and to do. I intended to give it up one day, but until then, I wanted to be on the line. I was given a company and assigned to the *Taos*. It's where I am now. It's a good

ship. I command good soldiers. In this life, you can't ask for much more than that.

Never seeing Jane again is rather less dramatic. After all, there's not much to not seeing someone. Jane took the first shuttle up to the *Amarillo*; the ship's doctor there took one look at her Special Forces designation and wheeled her into the corner of the medical bay, to remain in stasis until they returned to Phoenix and she could be worked on by Special Forces medical technicians. I eventually made it back to Phoenix on the *Bakersfield*. By that time Jane was deep in the bowels of the Special Forces medical wing and unreachable by a mere mortal such as myself, even if I was a newly minted hero.

Shortly thereafter I was decorated, promoted and made to begin my barnstorming tour of the colonies. I eventually received word from Major Crick that Jane had recuperated and was reassigned, along with most of the surviving crew of the *Sparrowhawk,* to a new ship called the *Kite*. Beyond that, it did no good to try to send Jane a message. The Special Forces were the Special Forces. They were the Ghost Brigades. You're not supposed to know where they're going or what they're doing or even that they're there in front of your own face.

I know they're there, however. Whenever Special Forces soldiers see me, they ping me with their BrainPals—short little bursts of emotional information, signifying respect. I am the only realborn to have served in Special Forces, however briefly; I rescued one of their own and I snatched mission success out of the jaws of partial mission failure. I ping back, acknowledging the salute, but otherwise I outwardly say nothing to give them away. Special Forces prefer it that way. I haven't seen Jane again on Phoenix or elsewhere.

But I've heard from her. Shortly after I was assigned to the *Taos,* Asshole informed me I had a message waiting from an anonymous sender. This was new; I had never received an anonymous message via BrainPal before. I opened it. I saw a picture of a field of grain, a farmhouse in the distance and a sunrise. It could have been a sunset, but that's not the feeling that I got. It took me a second to realize the picture was supposed to be a postcard. Then I heard her voice, a voice that I knew all my life from two different women.

You once asked me where Special Forces go when we retire, and I told you that I didn't know—she sent. *But I do know. We have a place where we can go, if we like, and learn how to be human for the first time. When it's time, I think I'm going to go. I think I want you to join me. You don't have to come. But if you want to, you can. You're one of us, you know.*

I paused the message for a minute, and started it up again, when I was ready.

Part of me was once someone you loved—she sent. *I think that part of me wants to be loved by you again, and wants me to love you as well. I can't be her. I can just be me. But I think you could love me if you wanted to. I want you to. Come to me when you can. I'll be here.*

That was it.

I think back to the day I stood before my wife's grave for the final time, and turned away from it without regret, because I knew that what she was was not contained in that hole in the ground. I entered a new life and found her again, in a woman who was entirely her own person. When this life is done, I'll turn away from it without regret as well, because I know she waits for me, in another, different life.

I haven't seen her again, but I know I will. Soon. Soon enough.

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JOHN SCALZI
June 2004

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THE GHOST BRIGADES

John Scalzi

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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To Shara Zoll, for friendship and everything else. To Kristine and Athena, for their patience and love.

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PART I

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ONE

No one noticed the rock.

And for a very good reason. The rock was nondescript, one of millions of chunks of rock and ice floating in the parabolic orbit of a long-dead short-period comet, looking just like any chunk of that deceased comet might. The rock was smaller than some, larger than others, but on a distribution scale there was nothing to distinguish it one way or another. On the almost unfathomably small chance that the rock was spotted by a planetary defense grid, a cursory examination would show the rock to be composed of silicates and some ores. Which is to say: a rock, not nearly large enough to cause any real damage.

This was an academic matter for the planet currently intersecting the path of the rock and several thousand of its brethren; it had no planetary defense grid. It did, however, have a gravity well, into which the rock fell, along with those many brethren. Together they would form a meteor shower, as so many chunks of ice and rock did each time the planet intersected the comet's orbit, once per planetary revolution. No intelligent creature stood on the surface of this bitterly cold planet, but if one had it could have looked up and seen the pretty streaks and smears of these little chunks of matter as they burned in the atmosphere, superheated by the friction of air against rock.

The vast majority of these newly minted meteors would vaporize in the atmosphere, their matter transmuted during their incandescent fall from a discrete and solid clump to a long smudge of microscopic particles. These would remain in the atmosphere indefinitely, until they

became the nuclei of water droplets, and the sheer mass of the water dragged them to the ground as rain (or, more likely given the nature of the planet, snow).

This rock, however, had mass on its side. Chunks flew as the atmospheric pressure tore open hairline cracks in the rock's structure, the stress of plummeting through the thickening mat of gases exposing structural flaws and weaknesses and exploiting them violently. Fragments sheared off, sparkled brilliantly and momentarily and were consumed by the sky. And yet at the end of its journey through the atmosphere, enough remained to impact the planet surface, the flaming bolus smacking hard and fast onto a plain of rock that had been blown clean of ice and snow by high winds.

The impact vaporized the rock and a modest amount of the plain, excavating an equally modest crater. The rock plain, which extended for a significant distance on and below the planet surface, rang with the impact like a bell, harmonics pealing several octaves below the hearing range of most known intelligent species.

The ground trembled.

And in the distance, beneath the planet surface, someone finally noticed the rock.

"Quake," said Sharan. She didn't look up from her monitor.

Several moments later, another tremor followed.

"Quake," said Sharan.

Cainen looked over to his assistant from his own monitor. "Are you planning to do this every time?" he asked.

"I want to keep you informed of events as they happen," Sharan said.

"I appreciate the sentiment," Cainen said, "but you really don't have to mention it every single time. I *am* a scientist. I understand that when the ground moves we're experiencing a quake. Your *first* declaration was useful. By the fifth or sixth time, it gets monotonous."

Another rumble. "Quake," said Sharan. "That's number seven. Anyway, you're not a tectonicist. This is outside your many fields of expertise." Despite Sharan's typical deadpan delivery, the sarcasm was hard to miss.

If Cainen hadn't been sleeping with his assistant, he might have been irritated. As it was, he allowed himself to be tolerantly amused. "I don't recall *you* being a master tectonicist," he said.

"It's a hobby," said Sharan.

Cainen opened his mouth to respond and then the ground suddenly and violently launched itself up to meet him. It took a moment for Cainen to realize it wasn't the floor that jerked up to meet him, he'd been suddenly driven to the floor. He was now haphazardly sprawled on the tiles, along with about half the objects formerly positioned on his workstation. Cainen's work stool lay capsized a body length to the right, still teetering from the upheaval.

He looked over to Sharan, who was no longer looking at her monitor, in part because it lay shattered on the ground, near where Sharan herself was toppled.

"What was that?" Cainen asked.

"Quake?" Sharan suggested, somewhat hopefully, and then screamed as the lab bounced energetically around them again. Lighting and acoustic panels fell from the ceiling; both Cainen and Sharan struggled to crawl under workbenches. The world imploded around them for a while as they cowered under their tables.

Presently the shaking stopped. Cainen looked around in what flickering light still remained and saw the majority of his lab on the floor, including much of the ceiling and part of the walls. Usually the lab was filled with workers and Cainen's other assistants, but he and Sharan had come in late to finish up some sequencing. Most of his staff had been in the base barracks, probably asleep. Well, they were awake now.

A high, keening noise echoed down the hall leading to the lab.

"Do you hear that?" Sharan asked.

Cainen gave an affirmative head dip. "It's the siren for battle stations."

"We're under attack?" Sharan asked. "I thought this base was shielded."

"It is," Cainen said. "Or was. Supposed to be, anyway."

"Well, a fine job, I must say," Sharan said.

Now Cainen was irritated. "Nothing is perfect, Sharan," he said.

"Sorry," Sharan said, keying in on her boss's sudden irritation. Cainen grunted and then slid out from underneath his workbench and picked his way to a toppled-over storage locker. "Come help me with this," he said to Sharan. Between them they maneuvered the locker to where Cainen could shove open the locker door. Inside was a small projectile gun and a cartridge of projectiles.

"Where did you get this?" Sharan asked.

"This *is* a military base, Sharan," Cainen said. "They have weapons. I have two of these. One is here and one is back in the barracks. I thought they might be useful if something like this happened."

"We're not military," Sharan said.

"And I'm sure that will make a huge difference to whoever is attacking the base," Cainen said, and offered the gun to Sharan. "Take this."

"Don't give that to me," Sharan said. "I've never used one. You take it."

"Are you sure?" Cainen asked.

"I'm sure," Sharan said. "I'd just end up shooting myself in the leg."

"All right," Cainen said. He mounted the ammunition cartridge into the gun and slipped the gun into a coat pocket. "We should head to our barracks. Our people are there. If anything happens, we should be with them." Sharan mutely gave her assent. Her usual sarcastic persona was now entirely stripped away; she looked drained and frightened. Cainen gave her a quick squeeze.

"Come on, Sharan," he said. "We'll be all right. Let's just try to get to the barracks."

The two had begun to weave through the rubble in the hall when they heard the sublevel stairwell door slide open. Cainen peered through the dust and low light to make out two large forms coming through the door. Cainen began to backtrack toward the lab; Sharan, who had the same thought rather faster than her boss, had already made it to the lab doorway. The only other way off the floor was the elevator, which lay past the stairwell. They were trapped. Cainen patted his coat pocket as he retreated; he didn't have all that much more experience with a gun than Sharan and was not at all confident that he'd be able to

hit even one target at a distance, much less two, each presumably a trained soldier.

"Administrator Cainen," said one of the forms.

"What?" Cainen said, in spite of himself, and immediately regretted giving himself away.

"Administrator Cainen," said the form again. "We've come to retrieve you. You're not safe here." The form walked forward into a splay of light and resolved itself into Aten Randt, one of the base commandants. Cainen finally recognized him by the clan design on his carapace and his insignia. Aten Randt was an Eneshan, and Cainen was vaguely ashamed to admit that even after all this time at the base, they all still looked alike to him.

"Who is attacking us?" Cainen asked. "How did they find the base?"

"We're not sure who is attacking us or why," Aten Randt said. The clicking of his mouthpieces was translated into recognizable speech by a small device that hung from his neck. Aten Randt could understand Cainen without the device, but needed it to speak with him. "The bombardment came from orbit and we've only now targeted their landing craft." Aten Randt advanced on Cainen; Cainen tried not to flinch. Despite their time here and their relatively good working relationship, he was still nervous around the massive insectoid race. "Administrator Cainen, you cannot be found here. We need to get you away from here before the base is invaded."

"All right," Cainen said. He motioned Sharan forward to come with him.

"Not her," Aten Randt said. "Only you."

Cainen stopped. "She's my aide. I need her," he said.

The base shook from another bombardment. Cainen felt himself slam into a wall and collapsed to the ground. As he fell he noted that neither Aten Randt nor the other Eneshan soldier had moved so much as a fraction from their position.

"This is not an appropriate time to debate the issue, Administrator," Aten Randt said. The flat affect of the translation device gave the comment an unintentionally sardonic quality.

Cainen began to protest again, but Sharan gently took hold of his arm. "Cainen. He's right," she said. "You need to get out of here. It's bad enough any of us are here. But you being found here would be a very bad thing."

"I won't leave you here," Cainen said.

"*Cainen,*" Sharan said, and pointed at Aten Randt, who was standing by, impassive. "He's one of the highest-ranking military officers here. We're under attack. They're not going to send someone like him on a trivial errand. And now is not the time to argue anyway. So go. I'll find my way back to the barracks. We've been here a while, you know. I remember how to get there."

Cainen stared at Sharan for a minute and then pointed past Aten Randt to the other Eneshan soldier. "You," he said. "Escort her back to her barracks."

"I need him with me, Administrator," Aten Randt said.

"You can handle me by yourself," Cainen said. "And if she doesn't get the escort from him, she'll get the escort from me."

Aten Randt covered his translation device and motioned the soldier over. They leaned in close and clacked at each other quietly—not that it mattered, as Cainen didn't understand Eneshan language. Then the two separated and the soldier went to stand by Sharan.

"He will take her to her barracks," Aten Randt said. "But there is to be no more argument from you. We have wasted too much time already. Come with me now, Administrator." He reached out, grabbed Cainen by the arm and pulled him toward the stairwell door. Cainen glanced back to see Sharan staring up fearfully at the immense Eneshan soldier. This final image of his assistant and lover disappeared as Aten Randt shoved him through the doorway.

"That hurt," Cainen said.

"Quiet," Aten Randt said, and pushed Cainen forward on the stairs. They began to climb, the Eneshan's surprisingly short and delicate lower appendages matching Cainen's own stride up the steps. "It took far too long to find you and too long to get you moving. Why were you not in your barracks?"

"We were finishing up some work," Cainen said. "It's not as if we have much else to do around here. Where are we going now?"

"Up," Aten Randt said. "There is an underground service railroad we need to get to."

Cainen stopped for a moment and looked back at Aten Randt, who despite being several steps below him was nearly at the same height. "That goes to hydroponics," Cainen said. Cainen, Sharan and other members of his staff would go to the base's immense underground hydroponics bay on occasion for the greenery; the planet's surface was not exactly inviting unless hypothermia was something you enjoyed. Hydroponics was the closest you could get to being outside.

"Hydroponics is in a natural cave," Aten Randt said, prodding Cainen back into motion. "An underground river lies beyond it, in a sealed area. It flows into an underground lake. There is a small living module hidden there that will hold you."

"You never told me about this before," Cainen said.

"We did not expect the need to tell you," Aten Randt said.

"Am I swimming there?" Cainen asked.

"There is a small submersible," Aten Randt said. "It will be cramped, even for you. But it has already been programmed with the location of the module."

"And how long will I be staying there?"

"Let us hope no time at all," Aten Randt said. "Because the alternative will be a very long time indeed. Two more flights, Administrator."

The two stopped at the door two flights up, as Cainen attempted to catch his breath and Aten Randt clicked his mouthpieces into his communicator. The noise of battle several stories above them filtered down through the stone of the ground and the concrete of the walls. "They've reached the base but we're holding them on the surface for now," Aten Randt said to Cainen, lowering his communicator. "They haven't reached this level. We may still get you to safety. Follow close behind me, Administrator. Don't fall behind. Do you understand me?"

"I understand," said Cainen.

"Then let's go," Aten Randt said. He hoisted his rather impressive weapon, opened the door, and strode out into the hall. As Aten Randt began moving, Cainen saw the Eneshan's lower appendages extend as an additional leg articulation emerged from inside his carapace. It was a

sprinting mechanism that gave Eneshans terrifying speed and agility in battle situations and reminded Cainen of any number of creepy-crawlies from his childhood. He repressed a shiver of revulsion and raced to keep up, stumbling more than once in the debris-strewn hallway, heading all too slowly for the small rail station on the other side of the level.

Cainen panted up as Aten Randt was examining the controls of the small rail engine, whose passenger compartment was open to the air. He had already disconnected the engine from the railcars behind it. "I told you to keep up," Aten Randt said.

"Some of us are old, and can't double the length of our legs," Cainen said, and pointed to the rail engine. "Do I get on that?"

"We should walk," Aten Randt said, and Cainen's legs began to cramp preemptively. "But I don't think you'll be able to keep pace the entire distance, and we're running out of time. We'll have to risk using this. Get on." Cainen gratefully climbed into the passenger area, which was roomy, built as it was for two Enesha. Aten Randt eased the little engine to its full speed—about twice an Eneshan's sprinting pace, which seemed uncomfortably fast in the cramped tunnel—and then turned around and raised his weapon again, scanning the tunnel behind them for targets.

"What happens to me if the base is overrun?" Cainen asked.

"You'll be safe in the living module," Aten Randt said.

"Yes, but if the base is overrun, who will come to get me?" Cainen asked. "I can't stay in that module forever, and I won't know how to get back out. No matter how well-prepared this module of yours is, it will eventually run out of supplies. Not to mention air."

"The module has the ability to extract dissolved oxygen from the water," Aten Randt said. "You won't suffocate."

"Wonderful. But that still leaves starvation," said Cainen.

"The lake has an outlet—" Aten Randt began, and that was as far as he got before the engine derailed with a sudden jerk. The roar of the collapsing tunnel drowned out all other noise; Cainen and Aten Randt found themselves briefly airborne as they were hurled from the passenger area of the rail engine into the sudden, dusty darkness.

Cainen found himself being prodded awake an indeterminate time later by Aten Randt. "Wake up, Administrator," Aten Randt said.

"I can't see anything," Cainen said. Aten Randt responded by shining a beam from the lamp attached to his weapon. "Thanks," Cainen said.

"Are you all right?" Aten Randt asked.

"I'm fine," Cainen said. "If at all possible I'd like to get through the *rest* of the day without hitting the ground again." Aten Randt clicked in assent and swept his beam away, to look at the rock falls that had them closed in. Cainen started to get up, slipping a bit on the rubble.

Aten Randt swung the light beam back to Cainen. "Stay there, Administrator," Aten Randt said. "You'll be safer." The light beam dipped to the rails. "Those may still have current in them." The light beam trailed off again, back to the caved-in walls of their new holding pen. Whether by accident or design, the bombardment that struck the rail line had securely closed in Cainen and Aten Randt; there were no openings in the wall of rubble. Cainen noted to himself that suffocation had once again become a real consideration. Aten Randt continued his examination of their new perimeter and occasionally tried his communicator, which seemed not to be working. Cainen settled in and tried not to breathe too deeply.

Some time later Aten Randt, who had given up his examination and cast them both into darkness while he rested, flicked his light back on, toward the wall of rubble closest to the base.

"What is it?" Cainen asked.

"Be quiet," Aten Randt said, and moved closer to the wall of rubble, as if trying to hear something. A few moments later, Cainen heard it too: noise that could have been voices, but not of anyone local, or friendly. Shortly thereafter came the blasting noises. Whoever was on the other side of the wall of rubble had decided they were coming in.

Aten Randt moved back from the wall of rubble at speed and came up on Cainen, weapon raised, blinding him with the light beam. "I'm sorry, Administrator," Aten Randt said, and that was when it dawned on Cainen that Aten Randt's orders to get him to safety probably only went so far. On instinct more than thought Cainen twisted away from the light beam; the bullet intended for his center mass instead went into

his arm, spinning him around and slamming him into the ground. Cainen struggled to his knees and caught his shadow splayed before him as Aten Randt's light beam fell on his back.

"Wait," Cainen said, to his shadow. "Not in the back. I know what you have to do. Just not in the back. Please."

There was a moment, punctuated by the sounds of rubble blasting. "Turn around, Administrator," Aten Randt said.

Cainen turned, slowly, scraping his knees on the rubble and putting his hands in his coat pockets, as if they were manacles. Aten Randt sighted in; given the luxury of picking his shot he leveled his weapon at Cainen's brain.

"Are you ready, Administrator?" Aten Randt said.

"I am," Cainen said, and shot Aten Randt with the gun in his coat pocket, aiming up into the light beam.

Cainen's shot coincided with a blast from other side of the rubble wall. Aten Randt didn't appear to realize he had been shot until blood began flowing out of the wound in his carapace; the wound was barely visible to Cainen through the light. Cainen saw Aten Randt look down at the wound, stare at it for a moment, and then back at Cainen, confused. By this time Cainen had the gun out of his pocket. He fired at Aten Randt three more times, emptying his projectile cartridge into the Eneshan. Aten Randt leaned forward slightly on his front legs and then fell back an equal amount, the bulk of his large body settling on the ground with each of his legs splayed out at angles.

"Sorry," Cainen said, to the new corpse.

The space filled with dust and then light as the rubble wall was breached, and creatures bearing lights on their weapons flowed through. One of them spotted Cainen and barked; suddenly several light beams were trained on him. Cainen dropped his gun, raised his good arm in surrender and stepped away from Aten Randt's body. Shooting Aten Randt to keep himself alive wouldn't do him much good if these invaders decided to blow holes in him. Through the light beams one of the invaders came forward, jabbering something in its language, and Cainen finally got a look at the species he was dealing with.

His training as a xenobiologist kicked in as he ticked off the particulars of the species phenotype: Bilaterally symmetrical and

bipedal, and as a consequence with differentiated limbs for arms and legs; their knees bent the wrong way. Roughly the same size and body plan, which was unsurprising as an inordinately large number of so-called intelligent species were bipedal, bilaterally symmetrical and roughly similarly sized in volume and mass. It was one of the things that made interspecies relationships in this part of the universe as contentious as they were. So many similar intelligent species, so little usable real estate for all their needs.

But now the differences emerge, thought Cainen, as the creature barked at him again: A broader torso and abdominal plain, and a generally awkward skeletal structure and musculature. Stump-like feet; club-like hands. Outwardly obvious sexual differentiation (this one in front of him was female, if he remembered correctly). Compromised sensory input thanks to only two small optical and aural inputs rather than the optical and aural bands that wrapped nearly entirely around Cainen's head. Fine keratinous fibers on the head rather than heat-radiating skin folds. Not for the first time, Cainen reflected that evolution didn't do this particular species any great favors, physically speaking.

It just made them aggressive, dangerous and damned hard to scrape off a planet surface. A problem, that.

The creature in front of Cainen jabbered at him again and pulled out a short, nasty-looking object. Cainen looked directly into the creature's optical inputs.

"Fucking humans," he said.

The creature swiped him with the object; Cainen felt a jolt, saw a multicolored dance of light and fell to the ground for the last time that day.

"Do you remember who I am?" the human at the table said, as Cainen was led to the room. His captors had provided him with a stool that accommodated his (to them) backwards-facing knees. The human spoke and the translation came out of a speaker on the table. The only other object on the table was a syringe, filled with a clear fluid.

"You are the soldier who knocked me unconscious," Cainen said. The speaker did not give a translation of his words, suggesting that the soldier had another translation device somewhere.

"That's right," the human said. "I am Lieutenant Jane Sagan." She motioned at the stool. "Please sit."

Cainen sat. "It was not necessary to knock me unconscious," he said. "I would have come willingly."

"We had our reasons for wanting you unconscious," Sagan said. She motioned to his injured arm, where Aten Randt's bullet had struck him. "How is your arm?" she asked.

"It feels fine," said Cainen.

"We weren't able to fix it entirely," Sagan said. "Our medical technology can rapidly heal most of our injuries, but you are Rraey, not human. Our technologies don't map precisely. But we did what we could."

"Thank you," Cainen said.

"I assume you were shot by the Eneshan we found you with," Sagan said. "The one you shot."

"Yes," Cainen said.

"I'm curious as to why you two engaged in a firefight," Sagan said.

"He was going to kill me, and I didn't want to die," said Cainen.

"This begs the question of why this Eneshan wanted you dead," Sagan said.

"I was his prisoner," Cainen said. "I suppose his orders were to kill me rather than to allow me to be taken alive."

"You were his prisoner," Sagan repeated. "And yet you had a weapon."

"I found it," Cainen said.

"Really," Sagan said. "That's poor security on the part of the Enesha. That's not like them."

"We all make mistakes," Cainen said.

"And all the other Rraey we found in the base?" Sagan asked. "They were prisoners as well?"

"They were," Cainen said, and felt a wave of concern for Sharan and the rest of his staff.

"How was it that you all came to be prisoners of the Eneshans?" Sagan asked.

"We were on a Rraey ship that was taking us to one of our colonies for a medical rotation," Cainen said. "The Eneshans attacked our ship. They boarded us and took my crew prisoner and sent us here."

"How long ago was this?" Sagan asked.

"Some time ago," Cainen said. "I'm not exactly sure. We're on Eneshan military time here, and I'm unfamiliar with their units. And then there's the local planetary rotational period, which is fast and makes things more confusing. And I am also unfamiliar with human time divisions, so I can't describe it accurately."

"Our intelligence does not have any record of the Eneshans attacking a Rraey vessel in the last year—that would be about two-thirds of a *hked* for you," Sagan said, using the Rraey term for a full orbit of the home world around its sun.

"Perhaps your intelligence is not as good as you think," Cainen said.

"It's possible," Sagan said. "However, given that the Eneshans and the Rraey are still technically in a state of war, an attacked ship should have been noted. Your two peoples have fought over less."

"I can't tell you any more about it than what I know," Cainen said. "We were taken off the ship and to the base. What happened or didn't happen outside of the base in all this time is not a subject I know much about."

"You were being held prisoner at the base," Sagan said.

"Yes," Cainen said.

"We've been all through the base, and there's only a small detention area," Sagan said. "There's nothing to suggest you were locked up."

Cainen gave the Rraey equivalent of a rueful chuckle. "If you've seen the base you've also no doubt seen the surface of the planet," he said. "If any of us tried to escape we'd freeze before we got very far. Not to mention that there's nowhere to go."

"How do you know that?" Sagan said.

"The Eneshans told us," Cainen said. "And none of my crew planned an excursion to test the proposition."

"So you know nothing else of the planet," Sagan said.

"Sometimes it's cold, other times it is colder," Cainen said. "That is the depth of my knowledge of the planet."

"You're a doctor," Sagan said.

"I'm not familiar with that term," Cainen said, and pointed at the speaker. "Your machine is not smart enough to give an equivalent in my language."

"You're a medical professional. You do medicine," Sagan said.

"I am," Cainen said. "I specialize in genetics. That is why my staff and I were on that ship. One of our colonies was experiencing a plague that was affecting gene sequencing and cell division. We were sent to investigate and hopefully find a cure. I'm sure if you've been through the base you've seen our equipment. Our captors were kind enough to give us space for a lab."

"Why would they do that?" Sagan asked.

"Perhaps they thought if we kept busy with our own projects we would be easier to handle," Cainen said. "If so, it worked, because as a rule we kept to ourselves and tried not to make any trouble."

"Except for when you were stealing weapons, that is," Sagan said.

"I had them for some time, so apparently I didn't arouse their suspicions," Cainen said.

"The weapon you used was designed for a Rraey," Sagan said. "An odd thing for an Eneshan military base."

"They must have taken it from our ship as they boarded," Cainen said. "I'm sure as you search the base you'll find a number of other Rraey-designed items."

"So, to recap," Sagan said. "You and your crew of medical personnel were taken by the Eneshans an indeterminate time ago and brought here, where you've been prisoners and out of communication with any of your people. You don't know where you are or what plans the Enesha have for you."

"That's right," Cainen said. "Other than that I suppose they didn't want anyone to know I was there once the base was invaded, because one of them tried to kill me."

"That's true," Sagan said. "You fared better than your crew, I'm afraid."

"I don't know what you mean," Cainen said.

"You're the only Rraey that we found alive," Sagan said. "The rest had been shot and killed by the Eneshans. Most of them were in what appeared to be barracks. We found another near what I imagine was your lab, since it had quite a bit of Rraey technology in it."

Cainen felt sick. "You're lying," he said.

"I'm afraid not," Sagan said.

"You humans killed them," Cainen said, angrily.

"The Eneshans tried to kill *you,*" Sagan said. "Why *wouldn't* they kill the other members of your crew?"

"I don't believe you," Cainen said.

"I understand why you wouldn't," Sagan said. "It's still the truth."

Cainen sat there, grieving. Sagan gave him time.

"All right," Cainen said, eventually. "Tell me what you want from me."

"For starters, Administrator Cainen," Sagan said, "we'd like the truth."

It took a moment for Cainen to realize this was the first time the human had addressed him by his name. And title. "I've been telling you the truth," he said.

"Bullshit," Sagan said.

Cainen pointed to the speaker again. "I only got a partial translation of that," he said.

"You are Administrator Cainen Suen Su," Sagan said. "And while it's true enough that you have some medical training, your two primary areas of study are xenobiology and semi-organic neural net defense systems—two areas of study that I would imagine mesh together well."

Cainen said nothing. Sagan continued. "Now, Administrator Cainen, let me tell you a little of what *we* know. Fifteen months ago the Rraey and the Eneshans were fighting the same off-and-on war they'd been fighting for thirty years, a war that we encouraged since it kept the two of you out of our hair."

"Not entirely," Cainen said. "There was the Battle of Coral."

"Yes, there was," Sagan said. "I was there. I almost died."

"I lost a brother there," Cainen said. "My youngest. Perhaps you met him."

"Perhaps I did," Sagan said. "Fifteen months ago the Rraey and the Enesha were enemies. And then suddenly they were not, for no reason that our intelligence could figure out."

"We've already discussed the shortcomings of your intelligence," Cainen said. "Races stop warring all the time. After Coral, we and you stopped fighting."

"We stopped fighting because we beat you. You retreated and we rebuilt Coral," Sagan said. "Which is the point—there is a reason we stopped fighting, at least for now. You and the Enesha don't have a reason. That worries us.

"Three months ago the spy satellite we parked above *this* planet noticed that for an allegedly uninhabited world, it had suddenly begun to receive a lot of traffic, both Eneshan and Rraey. What makes this especially interesting to us is that this planet is claimed neither by the Enesha or the Rraey, but by the Obin. The Obin don't mix, Administrator, and they are strong enough that neither the Enesha nor the Rraey would think lightly about setting up shop in their territory.

"So we placed a more advanced spy satellite above the planet to look for signs of habitation. We came up with nothing. As a defense specialist, Administrator, would you like to hazard a guess as to why?"

"I would imagine the base was shielded," Cainen said.

"It was," Sagan said. "And as it happens, by the very sort of defense system you specialize in. We didn't know that at the time, of course, but we know it now."

"How did you find the base if it was shielded?" Cainen asked. "I am curious, in a professional sense."

"We dropped rocks," Sagan said.

"Excuse me?" Cainen asked.

"Rocks," Sagan said. "A month ago we salted the planet with several dozen seismic sensors, which were programmed to look for seismic signatures that suggested intelligently designed underground structures. Speaking from experience, secret bases are easier to shield when they're underground. We relied on the planet's natural seismic activity to narrow down areas to investigate. Then we dropped rocks in areas of interest. And then today we dropped several right before our attack, to get an exact sonic image of the base. Rocks are good because

they look like naturally occurring meteors. They don't scare anyone. And no one shields against seismic imaging. Most races are too busy shielding against optical and high-energy electromagnetic scans to consider sound waves much of a danger. It's the fallacy of high technology; it ignores the efficiency of lower orders of technology. Like dropping rocks."

"Leave it to humans to bang rocks together," Cainen said.

Sagan shrugged. "We don't mind when the other guy brings a gun to a knife fight," she said. "It just makes it easier for us to cut out his heart. Or whatever it is that he uses to pump blood. Your overconfidence works for us. As you can see because you are here. But what we really want to know, Administrator, is *why* you are here. Eneshans and Rraey working together is puzzling enough, but Eneshans and Rraey *and* Obin? That's not just puzzling. That's *interesting*."

"I don't know anything about who owns this planet," Cainen said.

"And what's even more interesting is you, Administrator Cainen," Sagan said, ignoring Cainen's comment. "While you were sleeping we did a gene scan on you to tell us who you are, then we accessed ship's records to learn a little of your history. We know one of your primary areas of xenobiological interest is humans. You're probably the Rraey's leading authority on human genetics. And we know you've also got a particular interest in how human brains work."

"It's part of my overall interest in neural nets," Cainen said. "I'm not *particularly* interested in human brains, as you say. All brains are interesting in their way."

"If you say so," Sagan said. "But whatever it was you were doing down there, it was important enough that the Eneshans would rather see you and your crew dead than in our hands."

"I told you," Cainen said. "We were their prisoners."

Sagan rolled her eyes. "For a minute, let's pretend we're both not stupid, Administrator Cainen," she said.

Cainen moved forward, leaning closer to Sagan from across the table. "What kind of human are you?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Sagan said.

"We know there are three kinds of human," Cainen said, and held up his fingers, so much longer and more articulated than human fingers, to count off the variations. "There are the unmodified humans, who are the ones who colonize planets. Those come in varying shapes and sizes and colors—good genetic diversity there. The second group is the largest part of your soldier caste. These also vary in size and shape, but to a far lesser extent, and they're all the same color: green. We know that these soldiers aren't in their original bodies—their consciousness is transferred from bodies of older members of your species to these stronger, healthier bodies. These bodies are extensively genetically altered, so much that they can't breed, either between themselves or with unmodified humans. But they're still recognizably human, particularly the brain matter.

"But the third group," Cainen said, and leaned back. "We hear stories, Lieutenant Sagan."

"What do you hear?" Sagan said.

"That they are created from the dead," Cainen said. "That the human germ plasm of the dead is mixed and remixed with the genetics of other species to see what will arise. That some of them don't even resemble humans, as *they* recognize themselves. That they are born as adults, with skills and ability, but no memory. And not only no memory. No *self*. No morality. No restraint. No—" He paused, as if looking for the right word. "No *humanity,*" he said, finally. "As you would put it. Child warriors, in grown bodies. Abominations. Monsters. Tools your Colonial Union uses for the missions they can not or will not offer to soldiers who have life experience and a moral self, or who might fear for their soul in this world or the next."

"A scientist concerned about souls," Sagan said. "That's not very pragmatic."

"I am a scientist, but I am also Rraey," Cainen said. "I know I have a soul, and I tend to it. Do you have a soul, Lieutenant Sagan?"

"Not that I know of, Administrator Cainen," Sagan said. "They are hard to quantify."

"So you *are* the third kind of human," Cainen said.

"I am," Sagan said.

"Built from the flesh of the dead," Cainen said.

"From her genes," Sagan said. "Not her flesh."

"Genes build the flesh, Lieutenant. Genes dream the flesh, wherein the soul resides," Cainen said.

"Now you're a poet," Sagan said.

"I'm quoting," Cainen said. "One of our philosophers. Who was also a scientist. You wouldn't know her. May I ask how old you are?"

"I'm seven, almost eight," Sagan said. "About four and a half of your *hked*."

"So young," Cainen said. "Rraey of your age have barely started their educations. I'm more than ten times your age, Lieutenant."

"And yet, here we both are," Sagan said.

"Here we are," Cainen agreed. "I wish we had met under other circumstances, Lieutenant. I would very much like to study you."

"I don't know how to respond to that," Sagan said. "'Thank you' doesn't seem appropriate, considering what being studied by you would probably mean."

"You could be kept alive," Cainen said.

"Oh, joy," Sagan said. "But you might get your wish, after a fashion. You must know by now that you are a prisoner—for real this time, and you will be for the rest of your life."

"I figured that out when you started telling me things I could report back to my government," Cainen said. "Like the rock trick. Although I assumed you were going to kill me."

"We humans are a pragmatic people, Administrator Cainen," Sagan said. "You have knowledge we can use, and if you were willing to be cooperative, there's no reason you couldn't continue your study of human genetics and brains. Just for us instead of for the Rraey."

"All I would have to do is betray my people," Cainen said.

"There is that," Sagan allowed.

"I think I would rather die first," Cainen said.

"With all due respect, Administrator, if you truly believed that, you probably wouldn't have shot that Eneshan who was trying to kill you earlier today," Sagan said. "I think you want to live."

"You may be right," Cainen said. "But whether you are right or not, *child,* I am done talking to you now. I've told you everything I'm going to tell you of my own free will."

Sagan smiled at Cainen. "Administrator, do you know what humans and Rraey have in common?"

"We have a number of things in common," Cainen said. "Pick one."

"Genetics," Sagan said. "I don't need to tell you that human genetic sequencing and Rraey genetic sequencing are substantially different in the details. But on the macro level we share certain similarities, including the fact that we receive one set of genes from one parent and the other from the other. Two-parent sexual reproduction."

"Standard sexual reproduction among sexually reproducing species," Cainen said. "Some species need three or even four parents, but not many. It's too inefficient."

"No doubt," Sagan said. "Administrator, have you heard of Fronig's Syndrome?"

"It's a rare genetic disease among the Rraey," Cainen said. "Very rare."

"From what I understand of it, the disease is caused because of deficiencies in two unrelated gene sets," Sagan said. "One gene set regulates the development of nerve cells, and specifically of an electrically-insulating sheath around them. The second gene set regulates the organ that produces the Rraey analog for what humans call lymph. It does some of the same things, and does other things differently. In humans lymph is somewhat electrically conductive, but in the Rraey this liquid is electrically insulating. From what we know of Rraey physiology this electrically insulating quality of your lymph usually serves no particular benefit or detriment, just as the electrically conductive nature of human lymph is neither a plus or minus—it's just there."

"Yes," Cainen said.

"But for Rraey who are unlucky enough to have two broken nerve development genes, this electrical insulation *is* beneficial," Sagan said. "This fluid bathes the interstitial area surrounding Rraey cells, including nerve cells. This keeps the nerve's electrical signals from going astray. What's interesting about Rraey lymph is that its composition is controlled hormonally, and that a slight change in the hormonal signal will change it from electrically insulating to electrically

conductive. Again, for most Rraey, this is neither here nor there. But for those who code for exposed nerve cells—"

"—it causes seizures and convulsions and then death as their nerve signals leak out into their bodies," Cainen said. "Its fatality is why it's so rare. Individuals who code for electrically-conductive lymph and exposed nerves die during gestation, usually after the cells first begin to differentiate and the syndrome manifests."

"But there's also adult onset Fronig's," Sagan said. "The genes code to change the hormonal signal later, in early adulthood. Which is late enough for reproduction to happen and the gene to be passed on. But it also takes two faulty genes to be expressed."

"Yes, of course," Cainen said. "That's another reason why Fronig's is so rare; it's not often that an individual will receive two sets of faulty nerve genes *and* two sets of genes that cause later-life hormonal changes in their lymph organ. Tell me where this is going."

"Administrator, the genetic sample from you when you came on board shows that you code for faulty nerves," Sagan said.

"But I don't code for hormonal changes," Cainen said. "Otherwise I'd be dead already. Fronig's expresses in early adulthood."

"This is true," Sagan said. "But one can also induce hormonal changes by killing off certain cell bundles within the Rraey lymph organ. Kill off enough of the bundles that generate the correct hormone, and you can still produce lymph. It will simply have different properties. Fatal properties, in your case. One can do it chemically."

Cainen's attention was drawn to the syringe that had been lying on the table through the entire conversation. "And that's the chemical that can do it, I suppose," Cainen said.

"That's the antidote," Sagan said.

Jane Sagan found Administrator Cainen Suen Su admirable in his way; he didn't crack easily. He suffered through several hours as his lymphatic organ gradually replaced the lymph in his body with the new, altered fluid, twitching and seizing as concentrations of the electrically-conductive lymph triggered nerve misfires randomly through his body, and the overall conductivity of his entire system

heightened with each passing minute. If he hadn't cracked when he did, it was very likely that he wouldn't have been able to tell them that he wanted to talk.

But crack he did, and begged for the antidote. In the end, he wanted to live. Sagan administered the antidote herself (not really an antidote, as those dead cell bundles were dead forever; he'd have to receive daily shots of the stuff for the rest of his life). As the antidote coursed through Cainen's body, Sagan learned of a brewing war against humanity, and a blueprint for the subjugation and eradication of her entire species. A genocide planned in great detail, based on the heretofore unheard of cooperation of three races.

And one human.

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TWO

Colonel James Robbins gazed down at the rotted, exhumed body on the morgue slab for a minute, taking in the decay of the body from more than one year under the dirt. He noted the ruined skull, fatally misshaped by the shotgun blast that carried away its top third, along with the life of its owner, the man who might have betrayed humanity to three alien races. Then he looked up at Captain Winters, Phoenix Station's medical examiner.

"Tell me this is Dr. Boutin's body," Colonel Robbins said.

"Well, it is," said Winters. "And yet it's *not*."

"You know, Ted, that's exactly the sort of qualified statement that's going to get my ass reamed when I report to General Mattson," Colonel Robbins said. "I don't suppose you'd like to be more forthcoming."

"Sorry, Jim," Captain Winters said, and pointed to the corpse on the table. "Genetically speaking, that's your man," Winters said. "Dr. Boutin was a colonist, which meant he's never been swapped into a military body. This means that his body has all his original DNA. I did the standard genetics testing. This body has Boutin's DNA—and just for fun I did a mitochondrial RNA test as well. That matched too."

"So what's the problem?" Robbins asked.

"The problem is with bone growth," Winters said. "In the real universe, human bone growth fluctuates based on environmental factors, like nutrition or exercise. If you spend time on a high-gravity world and then move to one with lower gravity, that's going to

influence how your bones grow. If you break a bone, that's going to show up too. Your entire life history shows up in bone development."

Winters reached over and picked up part of the corpse's left leg, which had been sheared from the rest of the body, and pointed to the cross-section of the femur visible there. "This body's bone development is *exceptionally* regular. There's no record of environmental or accidental events on its development, just a pattern of bone growth consistent with excellent nutrition and low stress."

"Boutin was from Phoenix," Robbins said. "It's been colonized for two hundred years. It's not like he grew up on a backwater colony where they're struggling to feed and protect themselves."

"Maybe not, but it still doesn't match up," Winters said. "You can live in the most civilized place in human space and still fall down a flight of stairs or break a bone playing sports. It's possible that you can get through life without even a greenstick fracture, but do you know anyone who's done it?" Robbins shook his head. "This guy did. But actually he didn't, since his medical records show he broke his leg, *this* leg"—Winters shook the chunk of leg—"when he was sixteen. Skiing accident. Collided with a boulder and broke his femur and his tibia. The record of that isn't here."

"I hear medical technology is good these days," Robbins said.

"It is excellent, thank you very much," Winters said. "But it's not magic. You don't snap a femur and not leave a mark. And even getting through life without breaking a bone doesn't explain the consistently regular bone development. The only way you're going to get this sort of bone development is if it develops without environmental stress of any kind. Boutin would have had to live his life in a box."

"Or a cloning crèche," Robbins said.

"Or a cloning crèche," Winters agreed. "The other possible explanation is that your friend here had his leg amputated at some point and had a new one grown, but I checked his records; that didn't happen. But just to be sure I took bone samples from his ribs, his pelvis, his arm and his skull—the undamaged portion, anyway. All these samples showed unnaturally consistent, regular bone growth. You've got yourself a cloned body here, Jim."

"Then Charles Boutin is still alive," Robbins said.

"That I don't know," Winters said. "But this isn't him. The only good news here is that by all physical indications, this clone was vatted right up until just before it died. It's extremely unlikely it was ever awake, or even if it was that it was conscious and aware. Imagine waking up and finding your first and last view of the world was a shotgun barrel. That'd be a hell of a life."

"So if Boutin's still alive, he's also a murderer," Robbins said.

Winters shrugged and set down the leg. "You tell me, Jim," he said. "The Colonial Defense Forces make bodies all time—we create modified superbodies to give to our new recruits, and then when their service is through we give them new normal bodies cloned from their original DNA. Do those bodies really have rights before we put consciousness into them? Each time we transfer their consciousness, we leave a body behind—a body that used to have a mind. Do *those* bodies have rights? If they do, we're all in trouble, because we dispose of them pretty damn quick. Do you know what we do with all those used bodies, Jim?"

"I don't," Robbins admitted.

"We mulch them," Winters said. "There are too many to bury. So we grind them up, sterilize the remains and turn them into plant fertilizer. Then we send the fertilizer to new colonies. Helps to acclimate the soil to the crops humans plant. You could say our new colonies live off the bodies of the dead. Only they're not *really* the bodies of the dead. They're just the cast-off bodies of the living. The only time we actually bury a body is when a mind dies inside of it."

"Think about taking some time off, Ted," Robbins said. "Your job is making you morbid."

"It's not the job that makes me morbid," Winters said, and pointed to the remains of not–Charles Boutin. "What do you want me to do with this?"

"I want you to have it reinterred," Robbins said.

"But it's not Charles Boutin," Winters said.

"No, it's not," Robbins agreed. "But if Charles Boutin is still alive, I don't want him to know *we* know that." He looked back at the body on the slab. "And whether this body knew what was happening to it or not, it deserved better than what it got. A burial is the least we can do."

"Goddamn Charles Boutin," General Greg Mattson said, and kicked up his feet on his desk.

Colonel Robbins stood at the other side of the desk and said nothing. General Mattson disconcerted him, as he always had. Mattson had been the head of the Colonial Defense Forces Military Research arm for almost thirty years, but like all CDF military personnel had a military issued body that resisted aging; he looked—as did all CDF personnel—no more than twenty-five years old. Colonel Robbins was of the opinion that as people advanced in rank through the CDF they should be made to appear to age slightly; a general who looked twenty-five years old lacked a certain gravitas.

Robbins briefly imagined Mattson appearing to be his true age, which had to be somewhere in the vicinity of 125 years old; his mind's eye saw something like a scrotal wrinkle in a uniform. This would be amusing to Robbins, save for the fact that at ninety years of age himself, he wouldn't look all that much better.

Then there was the matter of the other general in the room, who if his body showed his real age would almost certainly look younger than he already did. Special Forces disconcerted Robbins even more than regular CDF. There was something not quite right about people being three years old, fully grown and totally lethal.

Not that this general was three. He was probably a teenager.

"So our Rraey friend told us the truth," General Szilard said, from his own seat in front of the desk. "Your former head of consciousness research is still alive."

"Blowing the head off his own clone, now, that was a *nice* touch," General Mattson said, sarcasm dripping out his voice. "Those poor bastards were picking brains out of the lab equipment for a week afterward." He glanced up at Robbins. "Do we know how he did that? Grow a clone? That's something you shouldn't be able to do without someone noticing. He couldn't have just whipped one up in the closet."

"As near as we can tell, he introduced code into the clone vat monitoring software," Robbins said. "Made it look like one of the clone vats was out of service to the monitors. It was taken out to be serviced; Boutin had it decommissioned, and then put it in his private lab storage area and ran it off its own server and power supply. The

server wasn't hooked into the system and the vat was decommissioned, and only Boutin had access to the storage area."

"So he *did* whip one up in the closet," Mattson said. "That little fucker."

"You must have had access to the storage area after he was presumed dead," Szilard said. "Are you saying that no one thought it odd he had a clone vat in storage?"

Robbins opened his mouth but Mattson answered. "If he was a good research head—and he was—he'd have a lot of decommissioned and surplus equipment in storage, in order to tinker and optimize it without interfering with equipment that we were actually using. And I would assume that when we got to the vat it was drained and sterilized and disconnected from the server and the power supply."

"That's right," Robbins said. "It wasn't until we got your report that we put two and two together, General Szilard."

"I'm glad the information was useful," Szilard said. "I wish you had put two and two together earlier. I find the idea that Military Research had a traitor in its ranks—and as the head of an extremely sensitive division—appalling. You should have known."

Robbins said nothing to this; to the extent that Special Forces had any reputation at all beyond its military prowess, it was that its members were profoundly lacking in tact and patience. Being three-year-old killing machines didn't leave much time for social graces.

"What was to know?" Mattson said. "Boutin never gave any indication he was turning traitor. One day he's doing his work, the next we find him a suicide in his lab, or so we thought. No note. No anything that suggests he had anything on his mind but his work."

"You told me earlier that Boutin hated you," Szilard said to Mattson.

"Boutin *did* hate me, and for good reason," Mattson said. "And the feeling was mutual. But just because a man thinks his superior officer is a son of a bitch doesn't mean he's a traitor to his species." Mattson pointed to Robbins. "The colonel here doesn't particularly like me, either, and he's my adjutant. But he's not going to go running to the Rraey or the Enesha with top-secret information."

Szilard looked over at Robbins. "Is it true?" he said.

"Which part, sir?" Robbins said.

"That you don't like General Mattson," Szilard said.

"He can take some getting used to, sir," Robbins said.

"By which he means I'm an asshole," Mattson said, with a chuckle. "And that's fine. I'm not here to win popularity contests. I'm here to deliver weapons and technology. But whatever was going through Boutin's head, I don't think I had much to do with it."

"So what was it then?" Szilard said.

"You'd know better than we would, Szi," Mattson said. "You're the one with the pet Rraey scientist that you've taught to squeal."

"Administrator Cainen never met Boutin personally, or so he says," Szilard said. "He doesn't know anything about his motivations, just that Boutin gave the Rraey information on the most recent BrainPal hardware. That's part of what Administrator Cainen's group was working on—trying to integrate BrainPal technology with Rraey brains."

"Just what we need," Mattson said. "Rraey with supercomputers in their heads."

"He didn't seem to be very successful with the integration," Robbins said, and looked over to Szilard. "At least not from the data your people recovered from his lab. Rraey brain structure is too different."

"Small favors," Mattson said. "Szi, you have to have gotten something else out of your guy."

"Outside of his specific work and situation, Administrator Cainen hasn't been terribly useful," Szilard said. "And the few Eneshans we captured alive were resistant to conversation, to use a euphemism. We know the Rraey, the Enesha and the Obin are allied to attack us. But we don't know why, how or when, or what Boutin brings into the equation. We need your people to figure that one out, Mattson."

Mattson nodded to Robbins. "Where are we with that?" he asked.

"Boutin was in charge of a lot of sensitive information," Robbins said, pitching his answer to Szilard. "His groups handled consciousness transfer, BrainPal development and body-generation techniques. Any of that could be useful to an enemy, either to help it develop its own technology or to find weaknesses in ours. Boutin himself was probably

the leading expert on getting minds out of one body and into another. But there's a limit to how much of that information he could carry. Boutin was a civilian scientist. He didn't have a BrainPal. His clone had all his registered brain prostheses on him, and he's not likely to have gotten a spare. Prostheses are tightly monitored and he'd have to spend several weeks training it. We don't have any network record of Boutin using anything but his registered prosthesis."

"We're talking about a man who got a cloning vat past you," Szilard said.

"It's not impossible that he walked out of the lab with a store of information," Robbins said. "But it's very unlikely. It's more likely he left only with the knowledge in his head."

"And his motivations," Szilard said. "Not knowing those is the most dangerous thing for us."

"I'm more worried about what he knows," Mattson said. "Even with just what's naturally in his head, that's still too much. I have teams pulled off their own projects to work on updating BrainPal security. Whatever Boutin does know we're going to make obsolete. And Robbins here is in charge of combing through the data Boutin left behind. If there's anything in there, we'll find it."

"I'll be meeting with Boutin's former tech after we're done here," Robbins said. "Lieutenant Harry Wilson. He says he has something I might find interesting."

"Don't let us hold you up," Mattson said. "You're dismissed."

"Thank you, sir," Robbins said. "Before I go, I'd like to know what sort of time constraint we're working under here. We found out about Boutin by attacking that base. No doubt the Eneshans know we know about their plans. I'd like to know how much time we think we have before a retaliation."

"You have some time, Colonel," Szilard said. "Nobody knows we attacked that base."

"How can they not know?" Robbins said. "With all due respect to Special Forces, General, it's difficult to hide that sort of assault."

"The Eneshans know they've lost contact with the base," Szilard said. "When they investigate, what they're going to find is that a rocky chunk of comet the size of a football field hit the planet about ten

klicks from the base, obliterating it and everything else in the immediate area. They can run all the tests they want; nothing will show anything but evidence of a natural catastrophe. Because that's what it was. It just had a little help."

"This is very pretty," Colonel Robbins said, gesturing at what looked like a miniature light show on Lieutenant Harry Wilson's holographic display. "But I don't know what you're showing me here."

"It's Charlie Boutin's soul," Wilson said.

Robbins pulled himself away from the display and looked up at Wilson. "I beg your pardon," he said.

Wilson nodded toward the display. "It's Charlie's soul," he repeated. "Or more accurately, it's a holographic representation of the dynamic electrical system that embodies the consciousness of Charles Boutin. Or a copy of it, anyway. I suppose if you want to be philosophical about it, you could argue whether this is Charlie's mind or his soul. But if what you say about Charlie is true, he's probably still got his wits about him, but I'd say he's lost his soul. And here it is."

"I was told this sort of thing is impossible," Robbins said. "Without the brain the pattern collapses. It's why we transfer consciousness the way we do, live body to live body."

"Well, I don't know that it's *why* we transfer consciousness the way we do," Wilson said, "since I think people would be a lot more resistant to letting a CDF technician suck their mind out of their skull if they knew it was just going to sit in computerized storage. Would *you* do it?"

"Christ, no," Robbins said. "I nearly wet myself as it was when they transferred me over."

"My point exactly," Wilson said. "Nevertheless, you're right. Up until this"—he motioned at the hologram—"we couldn't do it even if we wanted to."

"So how did Boutin do it?" Robbins asked.

"He cheated, of course," Wilson said. "Before a year and a half ago, Charlie and everyone else had to work with human-derived technology, or whatever technology we could borrow or steal from

other races. And most other races in our part of space have more or less the same level of technology as we do, because weaker races get kicked off their land and die off or get killed. But there's one species who is light-years ahead of everyone else in the neighborhood."

"The Consu," Robbins said, and pictured one in his mind: large, crab-like and almost unknowably advanced.

"Right," said Wilson. "The Consu gave the Rraey some of their technology when the Rraey attacked our colony on Coral a couple years back, and we stole it from them when we counterattacked. I was part of the team assigned to reverse-engineer the Consu tech, and I can assure you that most of it we still don't understand. But one of the bits we *could* get our brains around we gave to Charlie to work with, to improve the consciousness transfer process. That's how I came to work with him; I taught him how to use this stuff. And as you can see, he's a quick study. Of course, it's easy to get things done when your tools improve. With this we went from banging rocks together to using a blowtorch."

"You didn't know anything about this," Robbins said.

"No," Wilson said. "I've seen something *like* this—Charlie used the Consu technology to refine the consciousness transfer process we have. We can create a buffer now that we couldn't before, which makes the transfer a lot less susceptible to failure on either end of the transfer. But he kept *this* trick to himself. I only found it after you told me to go looking through his personal work. Which was a lucky thing, since the machine I found this on was slated to be wiped and transferred to the CDF observatory. They want to see how well Consu tech models the inside of a star."

Robbins motioned to the hologram. "I think this is a little more important."

Wilson shrugged. "It's actually not very useful in a general sense."

"You're joking," Robbins said. "We can store consciousness."

"Sure, and maybe that *is* useful. But you can't *do* much with it," Wilson said. "How much do you know about the details of consciousness transfer?"

"Some," Robbins said. "I'm not an expert. I was made the general's adjutant for my organizational skills, not for any science background."

"Okay, look," Wilson said. "You noted it yourself—without the brain, the pattern of consciousness usually collapses. That's because the consciousness is wholly dependent on the physical structure of the brain. And not just *any* brain; it's dependent on the brain in which it arose. Every pattern of consciousness is like a fingerprint. It's specific to that person and it's specific right down to the genes."

Wilson pointed to Robbins. "Look at your body, Colonel. It's been deeply modified on a genetic level—you've got green skin and improved musculature and artificial blood that has several times the oxygen capacity of actual blood. You're a hybrid of your own personal genetics and genes engineered to extend your capabilities. So on a genetic level, you're not really you anymore—*except* for your brain. Your brain is entirely human, and entirely based on your genes. Because if it wasn't, your consciousness couldn't transfer."

"Why?" Robbins asked.

Wilson grinned. "I wish I could tell you. I'm passing along what Charlie and his lab crew told me. I'm just the electron pusher here. But I do know that it means that *this*"—Wilson pointed to the hologram—"does you no good as it is because it needs a brain, and it needs *Charlie's* brain, in order to tell you what it knows. And Charlie's brain has gone missing along with the rest of him."

"If this is no damn use to us," Robbins said, "then I'd like to know why you had me come down here."

"I said it's not very useful in a *general* sense," Wilson said. "But in a very specific sense, it could be quite useful."

"Lieutenant Wilson," Robbins said. "Please get to the point."

"Consciousness isn't just a sense of identity. It's also knowledge and emotion and mental state," Wilson said, and motioned back to the hologram. "This thing has the capacity to know and feel everything Charlie knew and felt right up to the moment he made this copy. I figure if you want to know what Charlie's up to and why, this is where you want to start."

"You just said we needed Boutin's brain to access the consciousness," Robbins said. "It's not available to us."

"But his *genes* are," Wilson said. "Charlie created a clone to serve his purposes, Colonel. I suggest you create one to serve yours."

"Clone Charles Boutin," General Mattson said, and snorted. "As if one wasn't bad enough."

Mattson, Robbins and Szilard sat in the general's mess of Phoenix Station. Mattson and Szilard were having a meal; Robbins was not. Technically speaking the general's mess was open to all officers; as a practical matter no one under the rank of general ever ate there, and lesser officers entered the mess only on the invitation of a general and rarely took more than a glass of water. Robbins wondered how this ridiculous protocol ever got started. He was hungry.

The general's mess sat at the terminal of Phoenix Station's rotational axis and was surrounded by a single shaped, transparent crystal that comprised its walls and ceiling. It gave an astounding view of the planet Phoenix, which circled lazily overhead, taking up nearly the entire sky, a perfect blue-and-white jewel whose resemblance to Earth never failed to give Robbins a sharp jab in the homesickness centers of the brain. Leaving Earth was easy when one was seventy-five and the option was death of old age within a few increasingly short years. But once you left you could never go back; the longer Robbins lived in the hostile universe the human colonies found themselves in, the more fondly he remembered the flabby but relatively carefree days of his fifties, sixties and early seventies. Ignorance was bliss, or at the very least was more restful.

Too late now, Robbins thought, and directed his attention back to Mattson and Szilard. "Lieutenant Wilson seems to think it's the best chance we have of understanding what was going on in Boutin's head. In any event, it's better than what we have now, which is nothing."

"How does Lieutenant Wilson know that it's Boutin's brain-wave he's got in his machine? That's what I want to know," Mattson said. "Boutin could have sampled someone else's consciousness. Shit, it could be his cat, for all we know."

"The pattern is consistent with human consciousness," Robbins said. "We can tell that much because we transfer hundreds of consciousnesses every day. It's not a cat."

"It was a joke, Robbins," Mattson said. "But it still might not be Boutin."

"It's possible it could be someone else, but it doesn't seem likely," Robbins said. "No one else in Boutin's lab knew he was working on this. There was no opportunity to sample anyone else's consciousness. It's not something you could take from someone without them noticing."

"Do we even know how to transfer it?" General Szilard asked. "Your Lieutenant Wilson said it was on a machine adapted from Consu technology. Even if we want to use it, do we know how to do it?"

"No," Robbins said. "Not yet. Wilson seems confident he can figure it out, but he's not an expert in consciousness transference."

"I am," Mattson said. "Or at least I've been in charge of the people who *are* long enough to know about it. The process involves physical brains as well as the consciousness that's carried over. For this we're down one brain. Not to mention there are ethical issues."

"Ethical issues?" Robbins said. He failed to keep the surprise out of his voice.

"Yes, Colonel, ethical issues," Mattson said, irritably. "Believe it or not."

"I didn't mean to question your ethics, General," Robbins said.

Mattson waved it away. "Forget it. The point stands. The Colonial Union has a long-standing law against cloning non-CDF personnel, alive or dead, but *especially* alive. The only time we clone humans is to stuff people back into unmodified bodies after their term of service is done. Boutin is a civilian, and a colonist. Even if we wanted to, we can't legally clone him."

"Boutin made a clone," Robbins said.

"If it's all the same we won't let the morals of a traitor guide us in this, Colonel," Mattson said, irritated again.

"You could get a research dispensation from Colonial law," Robbins said. "It's been done before. *You've* done it before."

"Not for something like this," Mattson said. "We get dispensations when we test weapons systems on uninhabited planets. Start messing with clones and some of the more reactionary types get a twitch in their skulls. Something like this wouldn't even get out of committee."

"Boutin's a key to whatever the Rraey and their allies have planned," Robbins said. "This might be a time to take a page from the

U.S. Marines and beg forgiveness rather than ask permission."

"I'd admire your willingness to hoist the Jolly Roger, Colonel," Mattson said. "But you're not the one they'll shoot. Or not the only one."

Szilard, who had been chewing a steak, swallowed and set down his utensils. "We'll do it," he said.

"Pardon?" Mattson said.

"Give the consciousness pattern to Special Forces, General," Szilard said. "And give us Boutin's genes. We'll use them to craft a Special Forces soldier. We use more than one set of genes to make every soldier; technically, it won't be a clone. And if the consciousness doesn't take, it will make no difference. It will just be another Special Forces soldier. There's nothing to lose."

"Except that if the consciousness *does* take, we'll have a Special Forces soldier with treason on his mind," Mattson said. "That doesn't sound appealing."

"We can prepare for that," Szilard said, and picked up his utensils again.

"You'll be using genes from a live person, and a colonist," Robbins said. "My understanding was that Special Forces only took the genes from CDF volunteers who die before they can serve. That's why they're called 'the Ghost Brigades.'"

Szilard looked up sharply at Robbins. "I don't much like that name," Szilard said. "The genes of dead CDF volunteers are one component. And typically we use the volunteer genes as the template. But Special Forces has a wider latitude in the genetic material we're able to use to build our soldiers. Given our mission for the CDF, it's almost a requirement. Anyway, Boutin *is* legally dead—we've got a dead body with his genes in them. And we don't know that he is alive. Does he have any survivors?"

"No," Mattson said. "He had a wife and kid, but they died before he did. No other family."

"Then there's no problem," Szilard said. "After you're dead, your genes aren't yours anymore. We've used expired colonist genes before. I don't see why we can't do it again."

"I don't remember hearing this about how you build your people, Szi," Mattson said.

"We're quiet about what we do, General," Szilard said. "You know that." He cut a piece of steak and speared it into his mouth. Robbins's stomach grumbled. Mattson grunted, leaned back in his chair, and looked up at Phoenix, imperceptibly turning in the sky. Robbins followed his gaze and felt another pang of homesickness.

Presently Mattson turned his attention back to Szilard. "Boutin is one of my people," he said. "For better or worse. I can't pass the responsibility for this to you, Szi."

"Fine," Szilard said, and nodded to Robbins. "Then let me borrow Robbins. He can act as your liaison, so Military Research will still have a hand in. We'll share information. We'll borrow the technician too. Wilson. He can work with our technicians to integrate the Consu technology. If it works, we have Charles Boutin's memories and motivations and a way to prepare for this war. If it doesn't work, I have another Special Forces soldier. Waste not. Want not."

Mattson looked over to Szilard, considering. "You seem eager to do this, Szi," Mattson said.

"Humans are moving toward war with three species who have allied together," Szilard said. "That's never happened before. We could take on any one of them, but not all three at once. Special Forces have been told to stop this war before it starts. If this helps us to do that, we should do it. Try it, at the very least."

"Robbins," Mattson said. "Your thoughts."

"If General Szilard is correct, then doing this would get around the legal and ethical issues," Robbins said. "That makes it worth a shot. And we'll still be in the loop." Robbins had his own personal set of worries about working with Special Forces technicians and soldiers, but it didn't seem the right time to air them.

Mattson, however, did not need to be so circumspect. "Your boys and girls don't play well with normal types, General," Mattson said. "That's one reason why Military Research and Special Forces research don't work together much."

"Special Forces are soldiers, first and last," Szilard said. "They'll follow orders. We'll make it work. We've done it before. We had a

regular CDF soldier take part in Special Forces missions at the Battle of Coral. If we can make that work, we can get technicians to work together without undue bloodshed."

Mattson tapped the table in front of him, pensively. "How long will this take?" he asked.

"We'll have to build a new template for this body, not just adapt previous genetics," Szilard said. "I'd need to double-check with my techs, but they usually take a month to build from scratch. After that it takes sixteen weeks minimum to grow a body. And then whatever time we need to develop the process to transfer the consciousness. We can do that and grow the body at the same time."

"You can't make that go any faster?" Mattson said.

"We could make it go faster," Szilard said. "But then you'd have a dead body. Or worse. You know you can't rush body manufacture. Your own soldiers' bodies are grown on the same schedule, and I think you remember what happens when you rush that."

Mattson grimaced; Robbins, who had been Mattson's liaison for only eighteen months, was reminded that Mattson had been at this job for a very long time. No matter their working relationship, there were still gaps in Robbins's knowledge of his boss.

"Fine," Mattson said. "Take it. See if you can get anything out of it. But you *watch* him. I had my problems with Boutin, but I never saw him as a traitor. He fooled me. He fooled everyone. You'll have Charles Boutin's mind in one of your Special Forces bodies. God only knows what he could do with one of those."

"Agreed," Szilard said. "If the transfer is a success, we'll know it sooner than later. If it's not, I know where I can put him. Just to be sure."

"Good," Mattson said, and looked up again at Phoenix, circling in sky. "Phoenix," he said, watching the world twirl above him. "A reborn creature. Well, *that's* appropriate. A phoenix is supposed to rise up from the flames, you know. Let's just hope *this* reborn creature doesn't bring everything down in them."

They all stared at the planet above them.

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THREE

"This is it," Colonel Robbins said to Lieutenant Wilson, as the body, encased in its crèche, was wheeled into the decanting lab.

"This is it," agreed Wilson, who moved over to a monitor that would momentarily display the body's vital signs. "Were you ever a father, Colonel?"

"No," Robbins said. "My personal inclinations didn't run that way."

"Well, then," Wilson said. "This is as close as you'll probably get."

Normally the birthing lab would be filled with up to sixteen Special Forces soldiers being decanted at once—soldiers who would be activated and trained together to build unit cohesion during training, and to ease the soldiers' disorientation at being activated fully conscious but without any memory to speak of. This time, there was just one soldier: The one who would house Charles Boutin's consciousness.

It had been more than two centuries since the nascent Colonial Union, faced with its spectacular failure to defend the earliest of its colonies (the planet Phoenix was called so for a reason), realized that unmodified human soldiers were unable to get the job done. The spirit was willing—human history recorded some of its greatest doomed battles in those years, with the Battle for Armstrong in particular studied as a masterful example of how to turn an imminent rout by alien forces into a shocking and painful Pyrrhic victory for one's enemy

—but the flesh was all too weak. The enemy, *all* of the enemies, were too fast, too vicious, too pitiless and too many. Human technology was good, and weapon to weapon humans were as well-equipped as the vast majority of their adversaries. But the weapon that ultimately matters is the one behind the trigger.

The earliest modifications were relatively simple: increased speed, muscle mass and strength, endurance. Early genetic engineers, however, were hampered by the practical and ethical problems of engineering humans in vitro, and then waiting for them to grow sufficiently large and smart enough to fight, a process that took roughly eighteen years. The Colonial Defense Forces discovered to its intense chagrin that many of its (relatively) lightly genetically-modified humans were not particularly pleased to discover they were raised as a crop of cannon fodder and refused to fight, despite the best indoctrination and propaganda efforts to persuade them otherwise. Unmodified humans were equally scandalized, as the effort smacked of yet another eugenics effort on the part of a human government, and the track record of eugenics-loving governments in the human experience was not exactly stellar.

The Colonial Union survived the wracking waves of political crises that followed in the wake of its earliest attempts to genetically engineer its soldiers, but just barely. Had the Battle for Armstrong not emphatically shown the colonies what sort of universe they were up against, the Union would likely have collapsed and the human colonies would have been left in the position of competing against each other as well as against every other intelligent species they had encountered to date.

The Union was also saved by the near-simultaneous arrival of dual, critical technological discoveries: the ability to force-grow a human body to adult size in months, and the emergence of the consciousness transfer protocol that allowed the personality and memories of one individual to be transported into another brain, provided that brain had the same genetics, and had been adequately prepared with a series of pre-transfer procedures that developed some of the necessary bioelectrical pathways in the brain. These new technologies allowed the Colonial Union to develop a large, alternate pool of potential recruits:

The elderly, many of whom would readily accept a life in the military rather than die of old age, and whose deaths, in any event, would not create the multi-generational demographic damage that ensued when large numbers of healthy young adults were blown out of the gene pool at the end of an alien's weapon.

Presented with this bountiful new pool of potential recruits, the Colonial Defense Forces found it had the luxury of making certain staffing choices. The CDF would no longer ask colonists to serve in the CDF; this had the salutary effect of allowing colonists to focus on developing their new worlds and making as many second-generation colonists as their planets could handle. It also eliminated a key source of political tension between the colonists and their government. Now that the young adults of the colonies were no longer extracted from their homes and families to die on battlefields trillions of miles away, the colonists were largely unconcerned with the ethical issues surrounding genetically modified soldiers, particularly ones who had, after all, volunteered to fight.

In the stead of colonists, the CDF chose to select its recruits from the inhabitants of humanity's ancestral home, Earth. The Earth held billions of people: More people on that single globe, in fact, than existed on all the human colonies combined. The pool of potential recruits was enormous—so large that the CDF further limited its pool, choosing to take its recruits from comfortable and industrialized nations whose economic circumstances allowed their citizens to survive well into their later years, and whose social blueprints created both an overemphasis on the desirability of youth and a parallel and profound national psychic discomfort with aging and death. These senior citizens were patterned by their societies to be excellent and eager recruits for the CDF; the CDF quickly discovered that these senior citizens would join up for a military tour even in the absence of detailed information about what such a tour entailed—and indeed, recruitment yields were higher the less the recruits knew. Recruits assumed military service in the CDF was like military service on Earth. The CDF was content to let the assumption stand.

Recruiting seniors from industrialized nations proved so successful that the Colonial Union protected its recruiting pool by banning

colonists from those nations, selecting its colonist pool from nations whose economic and social problems encouraged the more ambitious of its young people to get the hell out as soon as humanly possible. This division of military and colonist recruitment paid rich dividends for the Colonial Union in both areas.

The military recruitment of senior citizens presented the CDF with one unexpected problem: A fair number of recruits died before they could join the service, victims of heart attacks, strokes, and too many cheeseburgers, cheesecakes and cheese curds. The CDF, who took genetic samples from its recruits, eventually found itself stocked with a library of human genomes it wasn't doing anything with. The CDF also found itself with a desire and also a need to continue experimenting with the body models of the Colonial Defense Forces to improve their design, without cutting into the effectiveness of the fighting force it already had.

Then came a breakthrough: an immensely powerful, compact, semi-organic computer, thoroughly integrated with the human brain, which in a moment of profoundly inappropriate branding was lightly dubbed the BrainPal. For a brain already filled with a life's worth of knowledge and experience, the BrainPal offered a critical assist in mental ability, memory storage and communication.

But for a brain that was literally *tabula rasa,* the BrainPal offered even more.

Robbins peered into the crèche, where the body lay, held into place by a suspension field. "He doesn't look much like Charles Boutin," he said to Wilson.

Wilson, who was now making last-minute adjustments on the hardware that contained Boutin's recorded consciousness, didn't look up from his work. "Boutin was an unmodified human," he said. "He was well into middle age when we knew him. He probably looked something like this guy when he was twenty. Minus the green skin, cat's eyes and other modifications. And he probably wasn't as fit as this body is. I know *I* wasn't as fit in real life at age twenty as I am now. And I don't even have to exercise."

"You have a body engineered to take care of itself," Robbins reminded Wilson.

"And thank God. I'm a doughnut fiend," Wilson said.

"All you have to do to get it is get shot at by every other intelligent species in the universe," Robbins said.

"That is the catch," Wilson noted.

Robbins turned back to the body in the crèche. "All those changes won't mess with the transfer of consciousness?"

"Shouldn't," Wilson said. "The genes relating to brain development are unaltered in this guy's new genome. That's Boutin's brain in there. Genetically, at least."

"And how does his brain look?" Robbins asked.

"It's looks good," Wilson said, tapping the monitor of the crèche controller. "Healthy. Prepared."

"Think this will work?" Robbins asked.

"Got me," Wilson said.

"Good to see we're brimming with confidence," Robbins said.

Wilson opened his mouth to respond but was interrupted as the door opened and Generals Mattson and Szilard stepped through, accompanied by three Special Forces decanting technicians. The techs went straight to the crèche; Mattson went to Robbins, who saluted along with Wilson.

"Tell me this is going to work," Mattson said, returning the salute.

"Lieutenant Wilson and I were just talking about that," Robbins said, after a nearly imperceptible pause.

Mattson turned to Wilson. "And, Lieutenant?"

Wilson pointed to the body in the crèche, being fussed over by the technicians. "The body is healthy, and so is the brain. The BrainPal is functioning perfectly, which is no surprise. We've been able to integrate Boutin's consciousness pattern into the transfer machinery with surprisingly few problems, and the test runs we've done suggest there won't be a problem with transmission. In theory, we should be able to transfer the consciousness like we do with any consciousness."

"Your words sound confident, Lieutenant, but your voice doesn't," Mattson said.

"There are a lot of uncertainties, General," Wilson said. "Usually the subject is conscious when he transfers over. That helps with the process. We don't have that here. We won't know whether the transfer is successful until we wake up the body. This is the first time we've tried a transfer without two brains involved. If it's not actually Boutin's consciousness in there, the pattern won't take. Even if it *is* Boutin's consciousness in there, there's no guarantee it will imprint. We've done everything we can to assure a smooth transfer. You've read the reports. But there's still so much involved that we don't know about. We know all the ways it could go right, but not all the ways it could go wrong."

"Do you think it will work or don't you?" Mattson said.

"I think it will work," Wilson said. "But we need to have a healthy respect for all the things we don't know about what we're doing. There's a lot of room for error. Sir."

"Robbins?" Mattson said.

"Lieutenant Wilson's assessment seems right to me, General," Robbins said.

The technicians finished their assessment and reported to General Szilard, who nodded and walked over to Mattson. "The techs say we're ready," Szilard said.

Mattson glanced at Robbins, then Wilson. "Fine," he said. "Let's get this over with."

The Colonial Defense Special Forces build soldiers using a simple recipe: First, start with a human genome. Then *subtract*.

The human genome comprises roughly twenty thousand genes made from three billion base pairs, spread out over twenty-three chromosomes. Most of the genome is "junk"—portions of the sequence that do not code for anything in the final product of the DNA: a human being. Once nature puts a sequence into DNA it appears reluctant to remove it even if it does nothing at all.

Special Forces scientists are not nearly so precious. With each new body model they build, their first step is to strip out the redundant and switched-off genetic matter. What is left is a lean, mean, streamlined DNA sequence that is completely useless; editing the human genome

destroys its chromosomal structure, leaving it unable to reproduce. But this is just a first step. Reassembling and replicating the new genome is several steps away.

The new, small DNA sequence features every gene that makes a human what he or she is, and this simply is not good enough. The human genotype does not allow the human phenotype the plasticity the Special Forces require, which is to say: Our genes can't make the superhumans Special Forces soldiers need to be. What is left of the human genome is now rent apart, redesigned and reassembled to build the genes that will code for substantially enhanced abilities. This process can require the introduction of additional genes or genetic material. The genes that come from other humans usually present little problem with their incorporation, since the human genome is fundamentally designed to accommodate genetic information from other human genomes (the process by which this is usually, naturally and enthusiastically accomplished is called "sex"). Genetic material from other terrestrial species is also relatively easy to incorporate, seeing as all life on Earth features the same genetic building blocks and are related to each other genetically.

Incorporating genetic material from non-terrestrial species is substantially more difficult. Some planets evolved genetic structures roughly similar to Earth's, incorporating some if not all the nucleotides involved in terrestrial genetics (perhaps not coincidentally, the intelligent species of these planets have been known to consume humans from time to time; the Rraey, for example, found humans quite tasty). But most alien species have genetic structures and components wildly different from terrestrial creatures. Using their genes is not a simple matter of cutting and pasting.

Special Forces solved this problem by reading the DNA equivalent of the alien species into a compiler that then spat out a genetic "translation" in terrestrial DNA format—the resulting DNA, if allowed to develop, would create an entity as close to the original alien creature in appearance and function as it was possible to get. Genes from the transliterated creatures were then wrought into the Special Forces DNA.

The end result of this genetic designing was DNA that described a creature based on a human, but not a human at all—inhuman enough that the creature, if allowed to develop from this step, would be an unholy agglomeration of parts, a monstrous creature that would have sent its spiritual godmother Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley far around the bend. Having pulled the DNA so far from humanity, Special Forces scientists now sculpted the genetic message to jam the creature they were forming back into a recognizably human shape. Among themselves the scientists brooded that this was the most difficult step; some (quietly) questioned its utility. None of them, it should be noted, looked any less than human themselves.

The DNA, sculpted to offer its owner superhuman abilities in human shape, is now finally assembled. Even with the addition of non-native genes, it is substantially leaner than the original human DNA; supplemental coding causes the DNA to organize into five chromosomal pairs, down substantially from an unaltered human's twenty-three and only one more than a fruit fly. While Special Forces soldiers are provided the sex of their donor and genes related to sexual development are preserved in the final genetic reduction, there is no Y-chromosome, a fact that made the earliest Special Forces–assigned scientists (the male ones) vaguely uncomfortable.

The DNA, now assembled, is deposited into a vacant zygote shell, which is itself placed into a developmental crèche, and the zygote gently prodded into mitotic division. The transformation from zygote to full-fledged embryo proceeds at a profoundly accelerated rate, producing metabolic heat levels that come close to denaturing the DNA. The developmental crèche fills with heat-transferring fluid packed with nanobots, which saturate the developing cells and act as heat sinks for the rapidly growing embryo.

And still Special Forces scientists are not done lowering the percentage of humanity in their soldiers. After the biological overhaul come the technological upgrades. Specialized nanobots injected into the rapidly developing Special Forces embryo head to two destinations. Most head to marrow-rich bone cores, where the nanobots digest the marrow and mechanically breed in its place to create SmartBlood, with better oxygen-carrying capacity than true blood, more efficient clotting

and near-immunity to disease. The rest migrate to the fast-expanding brain and lay the groundwork for the BrainPal computer, which when fully constructed will be the size of an aggie marble. This marble, nestled deep in the brain, is surrounded by a dense network of antennae that sample the electric field of the brain, interpreting its wishes and responding through outputs integrated into the soldiers' eyes and ears.

There are other modifications as well, many experimental, tested within a small birthing group to see if they offer any advantages. If they do, these modifications are made more widely available among the Special Forces and hit the list for potential upgrades for the next generation of the Colonial Defense Forces' general infantry. If they don't, the modifications die with their test subjects.

The Special Forces soldier matures to the size of a newborn human in just over twenty-nine days; in sixteen weeks, provided the crèche's adequate metabolic management, it has grown to adult size. CDF attempts to shorten the developmental cycle resulted in bodies that fried in their own metabolic heat. Those embryos and bodies that didn't simply abort and die suffered DNA transcription errors, giving rise to developmental cancers and fatal mutations. Sixteen weeks was pushing the edge of DNA chemical stability as it was. At the end of sixteen weeks, the developmental crèche sends a synthetic hormone washing through the body, resetting the metabolic levels to normal tolerances.

During development the crèche exercises the body to strengthen it and allow its owner to use it from the moment he or she becomes conscious; in the brain, the BrainPal helps develop general neural pathways, stimulate the organs' processing centers, and prepare for the moment its owner was brought to consciousness, to help ease the transition from nothing to something.

For most Special Forces soldiers, all that was left at this point was "birth"—the decanting process followed by the quick and (usually) smooth transition into military life. For one Special Forces soldier, however, there was still one more step to take.

Szilard signaled to his techs, who began their tasks. Wilson focused again on his hardware, and waited for the signal to begin the transfer. The techs gave the all clear; Wilson sent the consciousness on its way. Machinery hummed quietly. The body in the crèche remained still. After a few minutes Wilson conferred with the techs, then with Robbins, who came over to Mattson. "It's done," he said.

"That's it?" Mattson said, and glanced over the body in the crèche. "*He* doesn't look any different. He still looks like he's in a coma."

"They haven't woken him up yet," Robbins said. "They want to know how you want to do it. Normally with Special Forces soldiers they wake them up with their BrainPals switched to conscious integration. It gives the soldier a temporary sense of self until he can create one of his own. But since there may already be a consciousness in there, they didn't want to turn that on. It might confuse the person in there."

Mattson snorted; he found the idea amusing. "Wake him up without switching on the BrainPal," he said. "If that's Boutin in there, I don't want him confused. I want him talking."

"Yes, sir," Robbins said.

"If this thing worked, he'll know who he is as soon as he's conscious, right?" Mattson said.

Robbins glanced over to Wilson, who could hear the conversation; Wilson give a half shrug, half nod. "We think so," Robbins said.

"Good," Mattson said. "Then I want to be the first thing he sees." He walked over to the crèche and placed himself in front of the unconscious body. "Tell them to wake up the son of a bitch," he said. Robbins nodded to one of the techs, who jabbed a finger at the control board she had been working from.

The body jolted, precisely the way people do in the twilight between wakefulness and sleep, when they suddenly feel like they are falling. Its eyelids fluttered and twitched, and flew open. Eyes darted momentarily, seemingly confused, and then fixed on Mattson, who leaned in and grinned.

"Hello, Boutin," Mattson said. "Bet you're surprised to see me."

The body strained to move its head closer to Mattson, as if to say something. Mattson leaned in obligingly.

The body screamed.

General Szilard found Mattson in the head down the hall from the decanting lab, relieving himself.

"How's the ear?" Szilard asked.

"What kind of goddamned question is that, Szi?" Mattson said, still facing the wall. "*You* get a screaming earful from a babbling idiot and tell me how it feels."

"He's not a babbling idiot," Szilard said. "You woke up a newborn Special Forces soldier with his BrainPal switched off. He didn't have any sense of himself. He did what any newborn would do. What did you expect?"

"I expected Charles fucking Boutin," Mattson said, and shook. "That's why we bred that little fucker in the crèche, if you'll recall."

"You knew it might not work," Szilard said. "I told you. Your people told you."

"Thanks for the recap, Szi," Mattson said. He zipped and moved over to the sink. "This little adventure has just been one big goddamn waste of time."

"He still might be useful," Szilard said. "Maybe the consciousness needs time to settle."

"Robbins and Wilson said his consciousness would be there as soon as he woke up," Mattson said. He waved his hands under the faucet. "Goddamn automatic faucet," he said, and finally covered the sensor completely with his hand. The water kicked on.

"This is the first time anyone's done something like this," Szilard said. "Maybe Robbins and Wilson were wrong."

Mattson barked out a short laugh. "Those two *were* wrong, Szi, no maybes about it. Just not in the way you suggest. Besides, are *your* people going to babysit a full-grown, man-sized infant while you're waiting for his 'consciousness to settle'? I'd be guessing 'no,' and I'm sure as hell not going to do it. Wasted too much time on this as it is." Mattson finished washing his hands and looked around for the towel dispenser.

Szilard pointed to the far wall. "Dispenser is out," he said.

"Well, of *course* it is," Mattson said. "Humanity can build soldiers from the DNA up but it can't stock a head with fucking paper towels." He shook his hands violently and then wiped the excess moisture on his pants.

"Leaving the issue of paper towels to the side," Szilard said, "does this mean you're relinquishing the soldier to me? If you are, I'm going to have his BrainPal turned on, and get him into a training platoon as soon as possible."

"You in a rush?" Mattson said.

"He's a fully developed Special Forces soldier," Szilard said. "While I wouldn't say I am in a rush, you know as well as I do what the turnover rate for Special Forces is. We always need more. And let's just say I have faith that this particular soldier may yet turn out to be useful."

"Such optimism," Mattson said.

Szilard smiled. "Do you know how Special Forces soldiers are named, General?" Szilard asked.

"You're named after scientists and artists," Mattson said.

"Scientists and philosophers," Szilard said. "Last names, anyway. The first names are just random common names. I'm named after Leo Szilard. He was one of the scientists who helped to build the first atomic bomb, a fact that he would later come to regret."

"I know who Leo Szilard was, Szi," Mattson said.

"I didn't mean to imply you didn't, General," Szilard said. "Although you never know with you realborn. You have funny gaps in your knowledge."

"We spend most of our later educational years trying to get laid," Mattson said. "It distracts most of us from stockpiling information about twentieth-century scientists."

"Imagine that," Szilard said, mildly, and then continued on his train of thought. "Aside from his scientific talents, Szilard was also good at predicting things. He predicted both of Earth's world wars in the twentieth century and other major events. It made him jumpy. He made it a point to live in hotels and always have a packed bag ready. Just in case."

"Fascinating," Mattson said. "What's your point?"

"I don't pretend to be related to Leo Szilard in any way," Szilard said. "I was just assigned his name. But I think I share his talent for predicting things, especially when it comes to wars. I think this war we've got coming is going to get very bad indeed. That's not just speculation; we've been gathering intelligence now that my people know what to look for. And you don't have to be in possession of intelligence to know that humanity going up against three different races makes for bad odds for us." Szilard motioned his head in the direction of the lab. "This soldier may not have Boutin's memories, but he's still got Boutin in him—in his genes. I think it'll make a difference, and we're going to need all the help we can get. Call him my packed bag."

"You want him because of a hunch," Mattson said.

"Among other things," Szilard said.

"Sometimes it really shows that you're a teenager, Szi," Mattson said.

"Do you release this soldier to me, General?" Szilard asked.

Mattson waved, dismissively. "He's yours, General," he said. "Enjoy. At least I won't have to worry about this one turning traitor."

"Thank you," Szilard said.

"And what are you going to do with your new toy?" Mattson asked.

"For starters," Szilard said, "I think we'll give him a name."

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FOUR

He came into the world like most newborns do: screaming.

The world around him was formless chaos. Something was close to him and making noises at him when the world showed up; it frightened him. Suddenly it went away, leaking loud noises as it went.

He cried. He tried to move his body but could not. He cried some more.

Another form approached; based on his only previous experience, he yelled in fear and tried to get away. The form made noise and movement.

Clarity.

It was as if corrective lenses had been placed on his consciousness. The world snapped into place. Everything remained unfamiliar, but everything also seemed to make sense. He knew that even though he couldn't identify or name anything he saw, it all had names and identities; some portion of his mind surged into life, itching to label it all but could not.

The entire universe was on the tip of his tongue.

::Can you perceive this?:: the form—the person—in front of him asked. And he could. He could hear the question, but he knew that no sound had been made; the question had been beamed directly into his brain. He didn't know how he knew this, or how it was done. He also didn't know how to respond. He opened his mouth to reply.

::Don't,:: the person in front of him said. ::Try *sending* me your reply instead. It's faster than speaking. It's what we all do. Here's how.::

Inside his head instructions appeared, and more than instructions, an awareness that suggested that anything he didn't understand would be defined, explained and placed into context; even as he thought this he felt the instructions he'd been sent expand, individual concepts and ideas branching off into pathways, searching for their own meanings in order to give him a framework he could use. Presently it coalesced into one big idea, a gestalt that allowed him to respond. He felt the urge to respond to the person in front of him grow; his mind, sensing this, offered up a series of possible responses. Each unpacked itself as the instructions had, offering up understanding and context as well as a suitable response.

All of this took slightly under five seconds.

::I perceive you,:: he said, finally.

::Excellent,:: the person in front of him said. ::I am Judy Curie.::

::Hello, Judy,:: he said, after his brain unpacked for him the concepts of names and also the protocols for responding to those who offer their names as identification. He tried to give his name, but came up blank. He was suddenly confused.

Curie smiled at him. ::Having a hard time remembering your name?:: she asked.

::Yes,:: he said.

::That's because you don't have one yet,:: Curie said. ::Would you like to know what your name is?::

::Please,:: he said.

::You are Jared Dirac,:: Curie said.

Jared sensed the name unpack in his brain. Jared: A biblical name (the definition of *biblical* unpacked, leading him to the definition of *book* and to the Bible, which he did not read, as he sensed the reading and subsequent unpacking thereof would take more than a few seconds), son of Mahalalel and the father of Enoch. Also the leader of the Jaredites in the Book of Mormon (another book left unpacked). Definition: The descendant. *Dirac* had a number of definitions, most derived from the name of Paul Dirac, a scientist. Jared had previously unpacked the meaning of names and the implications of naming conventions; he turned to Curie.

::I am a descendant of Paul Dirac?:: he asked.

::No,:: Curie said. ::Your name was randomly selected from a pool of names.::

::But my first name means *descendant*,:: Jared said. ::And last names are family names.::

::Even among realborn, first names usually don't mean anything,:: Curie said. ::And among us, last names don't either. Don't read too much into your names, Jared.::

Jared thought about this for a few moments, letting these ideas unpack themselves. One concept, "realborn," refused to unpack itself; Jared noted it for further exploration but left it alone for now. ::I am confused,:: he said, eventually.

Curie smiled. ::You will be confused a lot to begin with,:: she said.

::Help me be less confused,:: Jared said.

::I will,:: Curie said. ::But not for too long. You have been born out of sequence, Jared; your training mates already have a two-day start on you. You must integrate with them as soon as possible, otherwise you may experience a delay from which you may never recover. I will tell you what I can while I take you to your training mates. They will fill in the rest. Now, let's get you out of that crèche. Let's see if you can walk as well as think.::

The concept of "walk" unpacked itself as the restraints holding Jared in the crèche removed themselves. Jared braced himself and pushed forward, out of the crèche. His foot landed on the floor.

::One small step for man,:: Curie said. Jared was surprised that the unpacking inherent in that phrase was substantial.

• • •

::First order of business,:: Curie said, as she and Jared walked through Phoenix Station. ::You think you're thinking, but you're not.::

Jared's first impulse was to say *I don't understand,* but he held back, intuiting for the first time that this was likely to be his response to most things in the near future. ::Please explain,:: he said instead.

::You are newly born,:: Curie said. ::Your brain—your *actual* brain—is entirely empty of knowledge and experience. In its place, a computer inside your head known as a BrainPal is feeding you knowledge and information. Everything you think you understand is

being processed by your BrainPal and fed back to you in a way you can grasp. It is also the thing that is offering you suggestions on how to respond to things. Mind the crowd.:: Curie weaved to avoid a clot of CDF soldiers in the middle of the walkway.

Jared weaved with her. ::But I feel like I *almost* know so much,:: Jared said. ::Like I knew it once but now I don't.::

::Before you are born, the BrainPal conditions your brain,:: Curie said. ::It helps set down neural pathways common in all humans, and prepares your brain for rapid learning and processing of information. That's why it feels like you know things already, because your brain has been *prepared* to learn it. For the first month of your life, everything feels like *déjà vu*. Then you learn it, it gets stored in your actual brain, and you stop using your BrainPal like a crutch. Because of the way we are, we can gather information and process it—and learn it—several times faster than Realborn.::

Jared stopped, partly to let his mind unpack everything Curie had just said to him, but partly because of something else. Curie, sensing he had stopped, stopped as well. ::What?:: she said.

::That's the second time you've used that word. "Realborn." I can't find out what that means.::

::It's not something they put in your BrainPal,:: Curie said. She began walking again and motioned at the other soldiers on the walkway. ::"Realborn" is *them*. They're people who are born as babies and have to develop over a very long period of time—years. One of them who is sixteen years old might not know as much as you do now, and you've been alive for about sixteen minutes. It's really an inefficient way to do things, but it's the way it's done naturally and they think that means it's a good thing.::

::You don't?:: Jared asked.

::I don't think it's good or bad, aside from being inefficient,:: Curie said. ::I'm just as alive as they are. "Realborn" is a misnomer—we're really born too. Born, live, die. It's the same.::

::So we're just like them,:: Jared said.

Curie glanced back. ::No,:: she said. ::*Not* just like them. We're designed to be better physically and mentally. We move faster. We think faster. We even talk faster than they do. The first time you talk to a

realborn it will seem like they're moving at half speed. See, watch.:: Curie stopped, appeared to look confused, and then tapped the shoulder of a soldier who was walking by.

"Excuse me," she said, and she used her mouth to say it. "I was told there was a commissary on this level where I could get a really excellent hamburger, but I can't seem to find it. Can you help me?" Curie was speaking in a voice that mirrored to a close degree the voice Jared heard in his head…but slower, slow enough that for the briefest of seconds Jared had a hard time understanding what she was saying.

"Sure," the soldier said. "The place you're thinking of is a couple hundred yards from here. Just keep going the direction you're going and you'll hit it. It's the first commissary you come to."

"Great, thanks," Curie said, and started walking again. ::See what I mean?:: she said to Jared. ::It's like they're retarded or something.::

Jared nodded absently. His brain had unpacked the concept of "hamburger," which lead to an unpacking of "food," which caused him to realize something else entirely. ::I think I'm hungry,:: he said to Curie.

::Later,:: Curie said. ::You should eat with your training mates. It's part of the bonding experience. You'll be doing most things with your training mates.::

::Where are your training mates?:: Jared asked.

::What a funny question,:: Curie said. ::I haven't seen them for years. You rarely see your training mates once you're *out* of training. After that you're assigned to wherever they need you, and then you integrate with your squad and platoon. Right now I'm integrated with one of the Special Forces platoons that decants soldiers as they're born.::

Jared unpacked the concept of "integration" in his brain, but found he was having a problem understanding it. He tried working through it again but was interrupted by Curie, who kept talking. ::You're going to be at a disadvantage to the rest of your training mates, I'm afraid,:: she said to him. ::They woke up integrated and are already used to each other. It might take them a couple of days to get used to you. You should have been decanted and integrated at the same time as they were.::

::Why wasn't I?:: Jared asked.

::Here we are,:: Curie said, and stopped at a door.

::What's in here?:: Jared asked.

::Shuttle pilot ready room,:: Curie said. ::Time to get you a ride. Come on.:: She opened the door for him, then followed him inside.

Inside the room were three pilots, playing poker. "I'm looking for Lieutenant Cloud," Curie said.

"He's the one who's currently getting his ass kicked," said one of the pilots, who tossed a chip into the pot. "Raise ten."

"*Badly* kicked," said one of the others, and threw in his own chip. "See your ten."

"Your words of scorn would hurt so much more if we were actually playing for money," said the third, who by process of elimination would be Lieutenant Cloud. He dropped in three chips. "I see your ten, and raise you twenty."

"This is one of the drawbacks of having an all-expenses-paid tour of hell," said the first pilot. "When everything's paid for, they don't have a reason to give you money. Call."

"If I knew I was going to be working for socialists, I never would have signed up," said the second. "Call."

"Well, then, in addition to being dumb, you'd also be dead, wouldn't you?" Cloud said. "Talk about being alienated from your labor. You'd be alienated from *everything*. Also, you'd be out a couple hundred dollars on this hand." He spread out his cards. "Snake eyes and a trio of snowmen. Read 'em and weep."

"Aw, crap," said the first pilot.

"Thank God for Karl Marx," intoned the second.

"That's the first time in history *that* has been said at a poker table," said Cloud. "You should be proud."

"Oh, I am," said the other pilot. "But please don't tell my momma. It would break her Texan heart."

"Your secret is safe with me," Cloud said.

"Lieutenant Cloud," Curie said. "Sometime this century would be good."

"My apologies, Lieutenant," Cloud said. "I just had to finish up some ritual humiliation. I'm sure you understand."

"Not really," Curie said, and nodded to Jared. "Here is the recruit you need to take to Camp Carson. You should already have the orders and clearance."

"Probably," Cloud said, and paused for a minute as he accessed his BrainPal. "Yeah, it's here. It looks like my shuttle has been prepped and fueled too. Let me file a flight plan and we'll be good to go." He looked at Jared. "Taking anything with you but you?"

Jared glanced over to Curie, who shook her head. "No," he said. "It's just me." He was mildly startled to hear the sound of his own voice speaking for the first time, and how slowly the words formed. He became acutely aware of his tongue and its movement in his mouth; it made him vaguely queasy.

Cloud took in the exchange between Jared and Curie wordlessly and then motioned to a chair. "Okay, then. Have a seat, pal. I'll be with you in a just a minute."

Jared sat and looked up at Curie. ::What do I do now?:: he asked.

::Lieutenant Cloud here will shuttle you down to Phoenix, to Camp Carson, where you'll join your training mates,:: Curie said. ::They're a couple days ahead in their training but the first few days are mostly just for integrating and stabilizing personalities. You probably haven't missed any real training.::

::Where will you be?:: Jared asked.

::I'll be here,:: Curie said. ::Where did you think I would be?::

::I don't know,:: Jared said. ::I'm scared. I don't know anyone but you.::

::Be calm,:: Curie said, and Jared felt an emotional sense come from her to him. His BrainPal processed the wash of feeling and unpacked the concept of "empathy" for him. ::In a couple of hours you'll be integrated with your training mates and you'll be fine. It'll make more sense then.::

::Okay,:: Jared said, but felt doubtful.

::Good-bye, Jared Dirac,:: Curie said, and with a small smile turned and left. Jared felt her presence in his mind for a few moments longer until finally, as if Curie suddenly remembered she left the connection open, it shut off. Jared found himself revisiting their brief time together; his BrianPal unpacked the concept of "memory" for him. The

concept of memory provoked an emotion; his BrainPal unpacked the concept of "intriguing."

"Hey, can I ask you a question?" Cloud asked Jared, after they had begun their descent to Phoenix.

Jared considered the question, and the ambiguity of its structure that allowed for multiple interpretations. In one sense, Cloud had answered his question by asking it; he was clearly capable of asking Jared a question. Jared's BrainPal suggested, and Jared agreed, this was not likely the correct interpretation of the question. Presumably Cloud knew he was procedurally capable of asking questions, and if he previously was not, he would be now. As Jared's BrainPal unpacked and sorted additional interpretations, Jared found himself hoping that one day he'd be able to hit upon the correct interpretation of sentences without having to do endless unpacking. He'd been alive and aware just over an hour and already it was tiresome.

Jared considered his options and after a period of time that seemed long to him but seemed to be imperceptible to the pilot, ventured forth with the answer that seemed most appropriate in the context.

"Yes," Jared said.

"You're Special Forces, right?" Cloud asked.

"Yes," Jared said.

"How old are you?" Cloud asked.

"Right now?" Jared asked.

"Sure," Cloud said.

Jared's BrainPal informed him he had an internal chronometer; he accessed it. "Seventy-one," Jared said.

Cloud looked over. "Seventy-one years old? That makes you pretty old for Special Forces, from what they tell me."

"No. Not seventy-one years," Jared said. "Seventy-one minutes."

"No shit," Cloud said.

This required another quick moment of interpretational choices. "No shit," Jared said, finally.

"Damn, that's just weird," Cloud said.

"Why?" Jared asked.

Cloud opened his mouth, closed it, and shot a look at Jared. "Well, not that *you* would know this," Cloud said. "But for most of humanity it'd be a little odd to be having a conversation with someone who is only slightly more than an hour old. Hell, you weren't even alive when I started that poker game back there. At your age most humans have barely got the hang of breathing and taking a dump."

Jared consulted his BrainPal. "I'm doing one of those right now," he said.

This got an amused noise out of Cloud. "That's the first time I've ever heard one of you guys tell a joke," he said.

Jared considered this. "It's not a joke," he said. "I really *am* doing one of those right now."

"I sincerely hope it's the breathing," Cloud said.

"It is," Jared said.

"That's fine, then," Cloud said, and chuckled again. "For a minute there, I thought I'd discovered a Special Forces soldier with a sense of humor."

"I'm sorry," Jared said.

"Don't be sorry, for God's sake," Cloud said. "You're barely an hour old. People can live to a hundred without developing a sense of humor. I've got at least one ex-wife who went through most of our marriage without cracking a smile. At least you have the excuse of just being born. She had no excuse."

Jared considered this. "Maybe you weren't funny."

"See," Cloud said, "now you *are* telling jokes. So you are really seventy-one minutes old."

"Seventy-three now," Jared said.

"How is it so far?" asked Cloud.

"How is what so far?"

"This," Cloud said, and motioned around him. "Life. The universe. Everything."

"It's lonely," Jared said.

"Huh," Cloud said. "Didn't take you long to figure that one out."

"Why do you think Special Forces soldiers have no sense of humor?" Jared asked.

"Well, I don't want to suggest it's *impossible,*" Cloud said. "I've just never seen it. Take your friend back on Phoenix Station. The fair Miss Curie. I've been trying to get a laugh out of her for a year now. I see her every time I transport a gaggle of you Special Forces down to Camp Carson. So far, no luck. And maybe it's just her, but then from time to time I try to get a laugh out of the Special Forces soldiers I'm transporting down to the surface or bringing back up. So far, nothing."

"Maybe you really aren't funny," Jared suggested again.

"There you go again with the jokes," Cloud said. "No, I thought it might be that. But I don't have any problems making ordinary soldiers laugh, or at least some of them. Ordinary soldiers don't really have a lot of contact with you Special Forces types, but those of us that have all agree that you have no sense of humor. The best we can figure it's because you're born grown-up, and developing a sense of humor takes time and practice."

"Tell me a joke," Jared said.

"Are you serious?" Cloud said.

"Yes," Jared said. "Please. I'd like to hear a joke."

"Now I have to think of a joke," Cloud said, and thought for a moment. "Okay, I thought of one. I don't suppose you have any idea who Sherlock Holmes is."

"I do now," Jared said, after a couple of seconds.

"That's a very scary thing you just did," Cloud said. "All right. Here's the joke. Sherlock Holmes and his sidekick Watson decide to go camping one night, right? So they make a campfire, have a bottle of wine, roast some marshmallows. The usual. Then they bed down for the night. Later that night, Holmes wakes up and wakes up Watson. 'Watson,' he says, 'look up at the sky and tell me what you see.' And Watson says, 'I can see the stars.' 'And what does that tell you?' Holmes asks. And Watson starts listing things, like that there are millions of stars, and how a clear sky means good weather for the next day, and how the majesty of the cosmos is proof of a powerful God. When he's done, he turns to Holmes and says 'What does the night sky tell you, Holmes?' And Holmes says, 'That some bastard has stolen our tent!'"

Cloud looked over at Jared, expectantly, and then frowned after Jared stared back blankly. "You don't get it," Cloud said.

"I get it," Jared said. "But it's not funny. Someone *did* steal their tent."

Cloud stared at Jared for a moment, and then laughed. "I may not be funny, but you sure the hell are," he said.

"I'm not trying to be," Jared said.

"Well, that's part of your charm," Cloud said. "All right, we're entering the atmosphere. Let's put the joke-swapping on hold while I focus on getting us down in one piece."

Cloud left Jared on the tarmac of Camp Carson's skyport. "They know you're here," he said to Jared. "Someone is on the way to get you. Just stay put until they arrive."

"I will," Jared said. "Thank you for the trip and the jokes."

"You're welcome for both," Cloud said, "although I think one was probably more useful to you than the other." Cloud stuck out his hand; Jared's BrainPal unpacked the protocol and Jared stuck his hand into Cloud's. They shook.

"And now you know how to shake hands," Cloud said. "That's a skill to have. Good luck, Dirac. If I fly you back after your training maybe we'll swap a few more jokes."

"I'd like that," Jared said.

"Then you better learn a few between now and then," Cloud said. "Don't expect me to do all the heavy lifting. Look, someone's heading your way. I think he's for you. Bye, Jared. Stay clear of the lifters, now." Cloud disappeared back in his shuttle to prepare for his departure. Jared stepped away from the shuttle.

::Jared Dirac,:: said the rapidly approaching person.

::Yes,:: Jared responded.

::I am Gabriel Brahe,:: the other man said. ::I am the instructor assigned to your training squad. Come with me. It's time to meet the others you'll be training with.:: As quickly as he reached Jared, Brahe turned around and started walking toward camp. Jared hustled to follow.

::You were speaking to that pilot,:: Brahe said as they walked. ::What were you discussing?::

::He was telling me jokes,:: Jared said. ::He said that most soldiers don't think Special Forces have a sense of humor.::

::Most soldiers don't know anything about the Special Forces,:: Brahe said. ::Listen, Dirac, don't do that again. You're just adding fuel to their prejudices. When realborn soldiers say Special Forces don't have a sense of humor, it's their way of insulting us. Suggesting we're less human than they are. If we don't have a sense of humor we're like every other subhuman automaton humanity has made up to amuse itself. Just another emotionless robot for them to feel superior to. Don't give them a chance to do that.::

After Brahe's rant was unpacked by his BrainPal, Jared thought back to his talk with Cloud; he didn't sense that Cloud was suggesting he was superior to Jared. But Jared also had to admit he was only a couple of hours old. There were a lot of things he could be missing. Still, Jared felt a dissonance between what Brahe was saying and his own experience, small though it might be. He ventured a question.

::*Do* Special Forces have a sense of humor?:: he asked.

::Of course we do, Dirac,:: said Brahe, glancing back briefly. ::Every human has a sense of humor. We just don't have *their* sense of humor. Tell me one of your pilot's jokes.::

::All right,:: Jared said, and repeated the Sherlock Holmes joke.

::See, now, that's just stupid,:: Dirac said. ::As if Watson wouldn't know that the tent was missing. This is the problem with realborn humor. It's predicated on the notion that someone's an idiot. There's no shame in not having *that* sense of humor.:: Brahe radiated a sense of irritation; Jared decided not to carry the topic of conversation further.

Instead, Jared asked, ::Is everyone here Special Forces?::

::They are,:: Brahe said. ::Camp Carson is one of only two training sites for Special Forces, and the only training base of any kind on Phoenix. See how the camp is ringed by forest?:: Brahe motioned with his head to the edge of the camp, where earth-derived trees and native Phoenix megaflora competed for supremacy. ::We're more than six hundred klicks from civilization in any direction.::

::Why?:: Jared asked, remembering Brahe's earlier comment about the realborn. ::Are they trying to keep us away from everybody else?::

::They're trying to keep everybody else away from *us,*:: Brahe said. ::Special Forces training isn't like training for realborn. We don't need the distraction of regular CDF or civilians, and they might misinterpret what they see here. It's best if we're left alone to do what we do, and to do our training in peace.::

::I understand I am behind in my training,:: Jared said.

::Not in your training,:: Brahe said. ::In your integration. We begin training tomorrow. But your integration is as important. You can't train if you're not integrated.::

::How do I integrate?:: Jared asked.

::First, you meet your training mates,:: Brahe said, and stopped at the door of a small barracks. ::Here we are. I've told them you're here; they're waiting for you.:: Brahe opened the door to let Jared in.

The barracks were sparsely furnished and like every barracks for the last few centuries. Two rows of eight beds lined the sides of the barracks. In and among them fifteen men and women sat and stood, eyes focused on Jared. He felt overwhelmed by the sudden attention; his BrainPal unpacked the concept of "shy." He felt the urge to say hello to his training mates, and was suddenly aware that he wasn't sure how to speak to more than one person through his BrainPal; near simultaneously he realized that he could just open his mouth and speak. The complexities of communication confounded him.

"Hello," he said, finally. Some of his future training mates smiled at his primitive form of communication. None of them returned the salutation.

::I don't think I'm off to a good start,:: Jared sent to Brahe.

::They're waiting to say their introductions after you've integrated,:: Brahe said.

::When do I do that?:: Jared asked.

::Now,:: Brahe said, and integrated Jared with his training mates.

Jared had about a tenth of a second of mild surprise as his BrainPal informed him that as his superior officer, Brahe had limited access to his BrainPal, and then that datum was superseded by the fact that suddenly there were fifteen other people in Jared's head, and he was in

the heads of fifteen other people. An uncontrolled bolt of information seared through Jared's consciousness as fifteen life stories poured into him and his own meager store of experiences branched into fifteen pipelines. Salutations and introductions were unnecessary and superfluous; in an instant Jared knew and felt everything he would need to know about these fifteen strangers who were now as intimately part of him as any human could be with another human. It was a mercy that each of these lives was unnaturally short.

Jared collapsed.

::That was interesting,:: Jared heard someone say. Almost instantaneously he recognized the comment as coming from Brian Michaelson, even though he'd never communicated with him before.

::I hope he's not planning to make a habit out of *that*,:: another voice said. Steve Seaborg.

::Give him a break,:: said a third voice. ::He was born without being integrated. It's a lot to handle all of a sudden. Come on, let's get him up off the floor.::

Sarah Pauling.

Jared opened his eyes. Pauling was kneeling down next to him; Brahe and his other training mates formed a curious semicircle above him.

::I'm fine,:: Jared sent to all of them, keying his response to the squad-wide communication channel, which included Brahe. The choice to do this came naturally, part of the info dump of the integration. ::I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know how to handle it. But I'm fine now.::

From his training mates radiated emotions like auras, each different: concern, confusion, irritation, indifference, amusement. Jared followed the amused emotion back to its source. Pauling's amusement was visible not only as an emotional aura but from the quirky smile on her face.

::Well, you don't seem all that much worse for wear,:: Pauling said. She stood up and then extended her hand. ::Up you go,:: she said. Jared reached up, took her hand, and pulled himself up.

::Sarah's got a pet,:: Seaborg said, and there was a ripple of amusement among some of the squad, and a strange emotional ping that Jared suddenly recognized as a form of laughter.

::Shut up, Steve,:: Pauling said. ::You hardly know what a pet is.::

::Doesn't make him less of one,:: Seaborg said.

::Doesn't make you less of a jerk,:: Pauling said.

::I'm not a pet,:: Jared said, and suddenly all eyes turned to him. He found it less intimidating than the first time, now that he had all of them in his head. He focused his attention on Seaborg ::Sarah was simply being kind to me. It doesn't make me a pet, it doesn't make her my master. It just means she was nice enough to help me off the floor.::

Seaborg audibly snorted and then removed himself from the semicircle, intently finding something else to be interested in. A few others broke off to join him. Sarah turned to Brahe. ::Does this happen with every training squad?:: she asked.

Brahe smiled. ::Did you think being inside each other's heads would make it *easier* for you to get along? There's no place to hide. What's *really* surprising is that one of you hasn't taken a punch at someone else yet. Usually by this time I have to pry a couple of trainees apart with a crowbar.:: Brahe turned to Jared. ::You going to be all right?::

::I think so,:: Jared said. ::I need a little time to sort everything out. I have a lot in my head, and I'm trying to figure out where it all goes.::

Brahe looked back over to Pauling. ::You think you can help him sort it out?::

Pauling smiled. ::Sure,:: she said.

::You've got Dirac-watch, then,:: Brahe said. ::We start training tomorrow. See if you can get him up to speed with everything before then.:: Brahe walked off.

::I guess I really am your pet,:: Jared said.

A wash of amusement flowed off Pauling toward Jared ::You're a funny man,:: she said.

::You're the second person to tell me that today,:: Jared said.

::Yeah?:: Pauling said. ::Know any good jokes?::

Jared told Pauling the one about Sherlock Holmes. She laughed out loud.

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FIVE

Training for Special Forces soldiers takes two weeks. Gabriel Brahe began the training of Jared's squad—formally the 8th Training Squad—by asking its members a question.

::What makes you different than other human beings?:: he asked. ::Raise your hand when you have the answer.::

The squad, arrayed in a ragged semicircle in front of Brahe, was silent. Finally Jared raised his hand. ::We're smarter, stronger and faster than other humans,:: he said, remembering the words of Judy Curie.

::Good guess,:: Brahe said. ::But wrong. We are designed to be stronger, faster and smarter than other humans. But we're that way as a *consequence* of what makes us different. What makes us different is that alone among humans, we were born with a purpose. And that purpose is simple: to keep humans alive in this universe.::

The members of the squad looked around at each other. Sarah Pauling raised her hand. ::Other people help to keep humans alive. We saw them on Phoenix Station, on our way here.::

::But they weren't *born* for it,:: Brahe said. ::Those people you saw—the realborn—are born without a plan. They're born because biology tells humans to make more humans; but it doesn't consider what to *do* with them after that. Realborn go for years without the slightest clue what they're going to do with themselves. From what I understand, some of them never actually figure it out. They just walk through life in a daze and then fall into their graves at the end of it. Sad. And inefficient.

::You may do many things in your life, but walk through it in a daze will not be one of them,:: Brahe continued. ::You are born to protect humanity. And you are *designed* for it. Everything in you down to your genes reflects that purpose. It's why you are stronger, and faster, and smarter than other humans::—Brahe nodded toward Jared—::and why you are born as adults, ready to fight quickly, effectively and efficiently. It takes the Colonial Defense Forces three months to train realborn soldiers. We do the same training—and more—in two weeks.::

Steve Seaborg raised his hand. ::Why does it take the realborn so long to train?:: he asked.

::Let me show you,:: Brahe said. ::Today is the first day of training. Do you know how to stand at attention, or other basic drill maneuvers?:: The members of the training squad looked at Brahe blankly. ::Right,:: Brahe said. ::Here come your instructions.::

Jared sensed his brain flooding with new information. The perception of this knowledge sat thickly upon his consciousness, unorganized; Jared sensed his BrainPal funneling the information into the right places, the now-familiar unpacking process launching branching paths of information that connected with things that Jared, now a full day old, already knew.

Now Jared knew the military protocols of parade drilling. But more than that came an unexpected emotion that arose natively in his own brain, and was amplified and augmented by the integrated thoughts of his training squad: Their informal array in front of Brahe, with some standing, some sitting and some leaning back on the steps of their barracks, felt *wrong*. Disrespectful. Shameful. Thirty seconds later they were in four orderly rows of four, standing at attention.

Brahe smiled. ::You got it on the first try,:: he said. ::Parade rest.:: The squad shifted into parade rest position, feet apart, hand behind backs. ::Excellent,:: Brahe said. ::At ease.:: The squad visibly relaxed.

::If I told you how long it takes to train Realborn to do just that much just as well as you did, you wouldn't believe me,:: Brahe said. ::Realborn need to drill, to repeat, to practice again and again to get things right, to learn to do the things that you will learn and absorb in one or two sessions.::

::Why don't the realborn train this way?:: asked Alan Millikan.

::They can't,:: Brahe said. ::They have old minds, set in their ways. They have a hard enough time just learning to use a BrainPal. If I tried sending them the drill protocols like I just sent to you, their brains simply couldn't handle it. And they can't integrate—they can't share information between themselves automatically like you do, and like all Special Forces do. They're not designed for it. They're not born to it.::

::We're superior, but there are realborn soldiers,:: Steven Seaborg said.

::Yes,:: Brahe said. ::Special Forces are less than one percent of the entire CDF fighting force.::

::If we're so good, why are there so few of us?:: asked Seaborg.

::Because the realborn are scared of us,:: Brahe said.

::What?:: asked Seaborg.

::They doubt us,:: Brahe said. ::They've bred us for the purpose of defending humanity, but they're not sure we're human enough. They've designed us to be superior soldiers but they worry our design is flawed. So they see us as less than human and assign us the jobs they fear might make *them* less than human. They make just enough of us for those jobs but no more than that. They don't trust us because they don't trust themselves.::

::That's stupid,:: Seaborg said.

::That's ironic,:: Sarah Pauling said.

::It's both,:: Brahe said. ::Rationality is not one of humanity's strong points.::

::It's hard to understand why they think that way,:: Jared said.

::You're right,:: Brahe said, looking at Jared. ::And you've unintentionally hit on the racial flaw of the Special Forces. Realborn have a hard time trusting the Special Forces—but Special Forces have a hard time *understanding* the realborn. And it doesn't go away. I'm eleven years old::—a sharp pinging of amazement ricocheted through the squad; none of them could conceive of being that ancient—::and I swear to you I still don't *get* the realborn most of the time. Their sense of humor, which you and I have discussed, Dirac, is only the most obvious example of this. This is why in addition to physical and mental conditioning, Special Forces training also includes specialized training

into the history and culture of the realborn soldiers you will meet, so you can understand them, and how they see *us*.::

::Seems like a waste of time,:: Seaborg said. ::If the realborn don't trust us, why should we protect them?::

::It's what we were born to do—:: Brahe said.

::I didn't *ask* to be born,:: Seaborg said.

::—and you're thinking like a realborn,:: Brahe said. ::*We* are human too. When we fight for humans, we fight for ourselves. No one asks to be born, but we *are* born, and we *are* human. We fight for ourselves, as much as for any other human. If we don't defend humanity, we'll be just as dead as the rest of them. This universe is implacable.::

Seaborg lapsed into silence, but his irritation broadcast itself.

::Is this all we do?:: Jared asked.

::What do you mean?:: Brahe said.

::We are born for this purpose,:: Jared said. ::But can we do something else too?::

::What do you suggest?:: Brahe asked.

::I don't know,:: Jared said. ::But I'm only a day old. I don't know much.:: This got pings of amusement, and a smile from Brahe.

::We are born to this, but we're not slaves,:: Brahe said. ::We serve a term of service. Ten years. After that, we can choose to retire. Become like the realborn and colonize. There's even a colony set aside for us. Some of us go there; some of us choose to blend in with the realborn in the other colonies. But most of us stay with the Special Forces. I did.::

::Why?:: Jared asked.

::It's what I was born for,:: Brahe repeated. ::And I'm good at it. You're all good at it. Or will be, soon enough. Let's get started.::

::We do a lot of things faster than realborn,:: Sarah Pauling said, dipping into her soup. ::But I'm guessing that eating isn't one of them. If you ate too fast you'd choke. That'd be funny, but it would also be bad.::

Jared sat across from her at one of the two mess tables assigned to the 8th Training Squad. Alan Millikan, curious about the differences between realborn and Special Forces training, discovered that realborn trained in platoons, not squads, and that Special Forces training squads

were not the same size as squads in the CDF. Everything that Millikan learned on the subject was sent to the other members of the 8th and added to their store of information. Thus another benefit of integration made itself known: Only one member of the 8th had to learn something in order for all the other members to know it.

Jared slurped at his own soup. ::I think we eat faster than realborn,:: he said.

::Why is that?:: Pauling said.

Jared took a big spoonful of soup. "Because if they talk and eat soup at the same time, *this* happens," he said, drooling soup out of his mouth as he spoke.

Pauling put her hand to her mouth to stifle a laugh. ::Uh-oh,:: she said, after a second.

::What?:: Jared said.

Pauling glanced left, then right. Jared looked around, and saw the entire mess hall looking at him. Jared belatedly realized that everyone could, in fact, hear him speak when he used his mouth. Nobody else in the mess hall had spoken with their mouth during the entire meal. Jared suddenly realized that the last time he'd heard anyone else speak was when Lieutenant Cloud offered his farewells. Speaking out loud was weird.

::Sorry,:: he said, on a general band. Everyone returned to their food.

::You're making a fool of yourself,:: Steven Seaborg, down the table, said to Jared.

::It was just a joke,:: Jared said.

::"It was just a *joke,*":: Seaborg said, mockingly. ::Idiot.::

::You're not very nice,:: Jared said.

::"You're not very *nice,*":: Seaborg said.

::Jared may be an idiot, but at least he can think up his own words,:: Pauling said.

::Hey, shut up, Pauling,:: Seaborg said. ::No one asked *you* to butt in.::

Jared began to respond when an image popped up in his visual field. Squat, misshapen humans were arguing about something in high-

pitched voices. One of them began to mock the other by repeating his words, like Seaborg had been doing to Jared.

::Who are these people?:: Seaborg asked. Pauling too looked mystified.

Gabriel Brahe's voice popped into their heads. ::They're children,:: he said. ::Immature humans. And they're having an argument. I'll have you note they are arguing just like you were.::

::He started it,:: Seaborg said, looking for Brahe in the mess hall. He was at a far table, eating with other officers. He didn't turn to look at the trio.

::One of the reasons the realborn don't trust us is because they're convinced we're children,:: Brahe said. ::Emotionally stunted children in adult-sized bodies. And the thing about that is, they're *right*. We have to learn to control ourselves like adults do, just like all humans do. And we have far less time to learn how to do it.::

::But—:: Seaborg began.

::Quiet,:: Brahe said. ::Seaborg, after our afternoon drill you have an assignment. From your BrainPal you can access Phoenix's data net. You get to research etiquette and interpersonal conflict resolution. Find out as much as you can, and share it with the rest of the 8th by the end of the evening. Do you understand me?::

::Yes,:: Seaborg said. He glanced over at Jared accusingly and then lapsed silently into his food.

::Dirac, you get an assignment too. Read *Frankenstein*. See where it takes you.::

::Yes, sir,:: Jared said.

::And don't drool any more soup,:: Brahe said. ::You look like an ass.:: Brahe dropped his connection.

Jared looked over to Pauling. ::How come you didn't get in trouble?:: he asked her.

Pauling dipped the spoon into her soup. ::My food stays where it's supposed to,:: she said, and swallowed. ::And I don't act like a child.:: And then she stuck out her tongue.

The afternoon drill introduced the 8th to their weapon, the MP-35A "Empee" assault rifle. The rifle was bonded to its owner by use of BrainPal authentication; from that point forward only its owner or another human with a BrainPal could fire the rifle. This cut down on the chance of a CDF soldier having his own weapon used against him. The MP-35A was additionally modified for Special Forces soldiers to take advantage of their integration abilities; among other things, the MP-35A could be fired remotely. Special Forces had used this ability to fatally surprise any number of curious aliens over the years.

The MP-35A was more than a simple rifle. It could, at the discretion of the soldier using it, fire rifled bullets, shot, grenades, or small guided missiles. It also featured flamethrower and particle beam settings. Any of this panoply of ammunition was constructed on the fly by the MP-35A out of a heavy metallic block of nanobots. Jared wondered idly how the rifle managed the trick; his BrainPal obligingly unpacked the physics behind the weapon, leading to a massive and terribly inconvenient unpacking of general physical principles while the 8th was on the shooting range. Naturally all of this unpacked information was forwarded onto the rest of the squad, all of whom looked over at Jared with varying levels of irritation.

::Sorry,:: Jared said.

By the end of the long afternoon, Jared had mastered the MP-35A and its myriad of options. Jared and another recruit named Joshua Lederman focused on the options the Empee allowed for its rifled bullets, experimenting with different designs of the bullets and assessing the advantages and disadvantages of each, duly noting each to the other members of the squad.

When they were ready to move on to the other ammunition options available to them, Jared and Lederman took ample advantage of the information about those weapons fed in by other members of the 8th to master those options as well. Jared had to admit that whatever personal problems he might have with Steven Seaborg, if he ever needed someone to wield a flamethrower for him, Seaborg was going to be his first choice. Jared told him so as they hiked back to the barracks; Seaborg ignored him and pointedly started a private conversation with Andrea Gell-Mann.

After dinner, Jared staked out a spot on the steps of the barracks. After a brief tutorial from his BrainPal (and taking care to cache his explorations so as not to repeat his embarrassing data spill from earlier in the day), he signed on the Phoenix's public data net and secured a copy of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, revised third edition, 1831.

Eight minutes later he finished it and was in something of a state of shock, intuiting (correctly) why Brahe had him read it: He and all the members of the 8th—all of the Special Forces soldiers—were the spiritual descendants of the pathetic creature Victor Frankenstein had assembled from the bodies of the dead and then jolted into life. Jared saw how Frankenstein felt pride in creating life, but how he feared and rejected the creature once that life had been given; how the creature lashed out, killing the doctor's family and friends, and how creator and created were finally consumed in a pyre, their fates interlocked. The allusions between the monster and the Special Forces were all too obvious.

And yet. As Jared considered whether it was the fate of the Special Forces to be as misunderstood and reviled by the realborn as the monster was by his creator, he thought back on his brief encounter with Lieutenant Cloud. Cloud certainly didn't seem terrified or repulsed by Jared; he'd offered his hand to him, a gesture that Victor Frankenstein, pointedly, refused from the monster he created. Jared also considered the fact that while Victor Frankenstein was the creator of the monster, *his* creator—Mary Shelley—implicitly offered pity and empathy to the monster. The real human in this story was a rather more complex person than the fictional one, and more inclined toward the creature than its fictional creator.

He thought about *that* for a good, solid minute.

Jared greedily sought out links to the text, quickly alighting on the famous 1931 motion picture version of the story and devouring it at ten times speed, only to find himself greatly disappointed; the eloquence of Shelley's monster was replaced by a sad shambling grunter. Jared quickly sampled other filmed versions but was continually disappointed. The monster he identified with was almost nowhere to be seen in any of these, even in the versions that paid lip service to the

original text. Frankenstein's monster was a joke; Jared gave up on filmed versions before he reached the end of the twenty-first century.

Jared tried another tack and sought out stories of other created beings, and was soon acquainted with Friday, R. Deneel Olivaw, Data, HAL, Der Machinen-Mensch, Astro Boy, the various Terminators, Channa Fortuna, Joe the Robot Bastard and all manner of other droids, robots, computers, replicants, clones and genetically-engineered whatsits that were as much the spiritual descendants of Frankenstein's monster as he was. Curious, Jared moved backward in time from Shelley to find Pygmalion, golems, homunculi and clockwork automatons.

He read and watched the sad and often dangerous humorlessness of many of these creatures, and how it was used to make them objects of pity and comic relief. He now understood why Brahe was touchy about the whole sense of humor issue. Implicit in that touchiness was the idea that Special Forces were misrepresented in their depictions by the realborn, or so Jared thought until he went searching for literature or recorded entertainments featuring the Special Forces as main characters.

There were none. The Colonial era was rife with entertainments about the Colonial Defense Forces and its military battles and events—the Battle for Armstrong seemed a particularly revisited topic—but in none of them were the Special Forces even hinted at; the closest thing was a series of pulpy novels published on Rama colony featuring the adventures of a secret force of erotic superhuman soldiers, who mostly overcame fictional alien species by having energetic sex with them until they surrendered. Jared, who at this time understood sex largely in the reproductive sense, wondered why anyone would think this was a viable way to conquer one's enemies. He decided that he was probably missing something important about this sex thing and filed it away to ask Brahe about later.

In the meantime there was the mystery of why, from the point of view of the fiction output of the colonies, the Special Forces didn't exist.

But that was for another night, perhaps. Jared was eager to share his current explorations with his squad mates. He uncached his findings

and released them to the others. As he did he became aware that he wasn't the only one sharing discoveries; Brahe had assigned homework to the majority of the 8th, and these explorations came flooding into his perception. Among them, etiquette and the psychology of conflict resolution from Seaborg (whom Jared could sense rolling his eyes at almost all of the material he was passing along); major battles of the Colonial Defense Forces from Brian Michaelson; animated cartoons from a recruit named Jerry Yukawa; human physiology from Sarah Pauling. Jared made a note to make fun of her later for giving him grief about his own assignment earlier in the day. His BrainPal merrily began to unpack everything Jared's mates had learned. Jared leaned back into the stairs and watched the sunset as the information branched and expanded.

Phoenix's sun had well and truly set by the time Jared had unpacked all his new learning; he sat inside the small pool of light illuminating the barracks and watched Phoenix's analogue to insects zip around the light. One of the more ambitious of these small creatures landed on Jared's arm and plunged a needle-like proboscis into his flesh to suck out his fluids. A few seconds later it was dead. The nanobots in Jared's SmartBlood, alerted to their situation by his BrainPal, self-immolated inside the tiny animal, using the oxygen they carried as a combustible agent. The poor creature crisped from the inside; miniscule and almost invisible wisps of smoke vented out of its spicules. Jared wondered who it was who programmed that sort of defensive response into his BrainPal and SmartBlood; it seemed hateful of life in its intent.

Maybe the realborn are right to fear us, Jared thought.

From inside the barracks Jared could perceive his squad mates arguing about what they'd learned that night; Seaborg just declared Frankenstein's monster a bore. Jared launched himself inside to defend the monster's honor.

• • •

During the morning and afternoons of the first week, the 8th learned to fight, to defend, and to kill. In the evenings they learned everything else, including some things Jared suspected were of questionable value.

In the early evening of the second day, Andrea Gell-Mann introduced the 8th to the concept of profanity, which she picked up at lunch and shared just before dinner. At dinner members of the 8th enthusiastically told each other to pass the fucking salt, you fucking sack of shit, until Brahe told them to quit that goddamn shit, cocksuckers, because it got old pretty goddamn quick. There was general agreement that Brahe was correct, until Gell-Man taught the squad to swear in Arabic.

On the third day, members of the 8th asked for, and received, permission to enter the mess hall kitchens and use the ovens and certain ingredients. The next morning the other training squads at Camp Carson were presented with enough sugar cookies for every recruit (and their superior officers).

On the fourth day the members of the 8th tried to tell each other jokes they'd found on the Phoenix data net, and mostly failed to make them work; by the time their BrainPals unpacked the context of the joke, it was no longer funny. Only Sarah Pauling seemed to be laughing most of the time, and it was eventually determined she was laughing because she thought it was funny that none of the rest of them could tell a joke. No one else thought that was funny, to which Pauling laughed hard enough to fall off her cot.

They all agreed *that* was funny.

Also, puns were all right.

On the fifth day, during which the afternoon was spent in an informational session about the disposition of the human colonies and their relationship with other intelligent species (which was to say, bad all the time), the 8th critically evaluated pre–Colonial era speculative fiction and entertainments about interstellar wars with aliens. The verdicts were reasonably consistent. *The War of the Worlds* met with approval until the ending, which struck the 8th as a cheap trick. *Starship Troopers* had some good action scenes but required too much unpacking of philosophical ideas; they liked the movie better, even though they recognized it was dumber. *The Forever War* made most of the 8th unaccountably sad; the idea that a war could go on that long was almost unfathomable to a group of people who were a week old. After watching *Star Wars* everyone wanted a lightsaber and was

irritated that the technology for them didn't really exist. Everyone also agreed the Ewoks should all die.

Two classics stuck with them. *Ender's Game* delighted them all; here were soldiers who were just like them, except smaller. The main character was even bred to fight alien species like they were. The next day the members of the 8th greeted each other with the salutation ::Ho, Ender,:: until Brahe told them to knock it off and pay attention.

The other was *Charlie's Homecoming,* one of the last books before the Colonial era began, and one of the last books, therefore, to be able to imagine a universe other than what it was—one where the alien species humanity would meet greeted them with a welcome instead of a weapon. The book was eventually adapted into a film; by that time it was clear it wasn't science fiction, but fantasy, and a bitter one at that. It was a flop. The members of the 8th were transfixed by both the book and film, captivated by a universe they could never have, and one which would never have had them, because they wouldn't be needed.

On the sixth day, Jared and the rest of the 8th finally figured out what that sex thing was all about.

On the seventh day, and as a direct consequence of the sixth day, they rested.

::They're not of questionable value,:: Pauling said to Jared about the things they had learned, as they lay together in her cot late on the seventh day, intimate but not sexual. ::Maybe all of these things don't have any use in themselves, but they bring all of us closer together.::

::We *are* closer together,:: Jared agreed.

::Not just like this.:: Pauling pressed herself into Jared briefly, and then released. ::Closer as people. As a group. All of those things you mentioned are silly. But they're training us how to be human.::

It was Jared's turn to press himself into Pauling, snuggling into her chest. ::I like being human,:: he said.

::I like you being human too,:: Pauling said, and then audibly giggled.

::For fuck's sake, you two,:: Seaborg said. ::I'm trying to sleep over here.::

::Grump,:: Pauling said. She looked down at Jared to see if he would add anything, but he had fallen asleep. She kissed him lightly on the top

of his head and then joined him.

::In your first week, you physically trained to do all the things realborn soldiers can do,:: Brahe said. ::Now it's time to train you to do things only you can do.::

The 8th stood at the beginning of a long obstacle course.

::We've already run this course,:: said Luke Gullstrand.

::Good of you to notice, Gullstrand,:: Brahe said. ::For your observational skills, you get to be the first one to run it today. Stay here. The rest of you spread out over the length of the course, please, as equally as possible.::

Presently members of the 8th were strung along the course. Brahe turned to Gullstrand. ::You see the course?:: he asked.

::Yes,:: Gullstrand said.

::Do you think you could run it with your eyes closed?::

::No,:: Gullstrand said. ::I don't remember where everything is. I'd trip over something and kill myself.::

::Do you all agree?:: Brahe asked. There were pings of affirmation. ::And yet, all of you will run this course with your eyes closed before we leave here today. Because you have an ability that will allow you to do this: your integration with your squad members.::

From around the squad came varying levels of skepticism. ::We use our integration to talk and to share data,:: said Brian Michaelson. ::This is something entirely different.::

::No. Not different at all,:: Brahe said. ::The nighttime assignments of the last week were not just punishments and frivolity. You already knew that through your BrainPal and your pre-birth conditioning you could learn quickly *by yourself*. In the last week—without realizing it—you've learned to share and absorb immense amounts of information *between yourselves*. There is no difference between that information and *this*. Pay attention.::

Jared gasped audibly, as did other members of the 8th. In his head was not only the presence of Gabriel Brahe but an intimate sensation of his physical presence and personal situation, overlaid on Jared's own consciousness.

::Look through my eyes,:: Brahe said. Jared focused on the command and then had a sickening sense of vertigo as his perspective wheeled from his own vantage point to Brahe's. Brahe panned left and right and Jared saw himself, looking toward Brahe. Brahe snapped off the view.

::It gets easier the more you do it,:: Brahe said. ::And from now on, in every combat practice you *will* do it. Your integration gives you situational awareness that is unique in this universe. All intelligent species share information in combat however they can—even realborn soldiers keep a communication channel open through their BrainPals during battle. But only Special Forces have this level of sharing, this level of tactical awareness. It's at the heart of how we work and how we fight.

::As I said, last week you covered the basics of fighting like the realborn—you learned how to go into combat as an individual. Now it's time to learn to fight like Special Forces, to *integrate* your combat skills with your squad. You will learn to share and you will learn to trust what is shared with you. It will save your life and it will save the life of your squad mates. This will be the hardest and most important thing you learn. So pay attention.::

Brahe turned back to Gullstrand. ::Now, close your eyes.::

Gullstrand hesitated. ::I don't know if I can keep my eyes closed, :: he said.

::You're going to have to trust your squad,:: Brahe said.

::I trust the squad,:: Gullstrand said. ::I just don't trust *myself*.:: This got a sympathetic round of pings.

::That's part of the exercise as well,:: Brahe said. ::Off you go.::

Gullstrand closed his eyes and took a step. From his vantage point halfway down the course, Jared could see Jerry Yukawa, in the first position, lean in slightly, as if physically attempting to close the distance between his mind and Gullstrand's. Gullstrand's passage through the obstacle course was slow but became progressively steadier; just before reaching Jared, and just after balancing on a wood beam suspended over mud, Gullstrand began to a smile. He had become a believer.

Jared felt Gullstrand reach for his point of view. Jared give him full access to his senses and passed along a feeling of encouragement and assurance. He sensed Gullstrand receiving it and briefly passing along his thanks; then Gullstrand focused on scaling the rope wall Jared stood to the side of. At the top, he felt Gullstrand move on to the next squad member in the line, fully confident. By the end of the course, Gullstrand was moving nearly at full speed.

::Excellent,:: Brahe said. ::Gullstrand, take over that last position. Everybody else move down one position. Yukawa, you're up.::

Two run-throughs later, not only were members of the squad sharing their perspective with the squad mate running the course; the squad mate on the course was sharing his shared perspective with them, giving everyone who hadn't run through the course a preview of what was coming up next. The next run-through after that had the squad mates on the side sharing vantage points with the person one station up from them, so they could better help the person on the course when they shifted into the position. By the time Jared was himself on the court, the entire squad had fully integrated their perspectives and were getting the hang of quickly sampling another perspective and picking out the relevant information without breaking from their own point of view. It was like being in two places at once.

When Jared was on the course himself, he exulted in the strange intelligence of it all, at least until the beams over the mud, when his borrowed visual vantage point suddenly wheeled away from where his feet were. Jared missed his footing and fell flat into the mud.

::Sorry about that,:: said Steven Seaborg a few seconds later, as Jared pulled himself out, eyes open. ::Got bit by something. Distracted me.::

::*Bullshit*,:: Alan Millikan sent to Jared, privately. ::*I was one station down and looking right at him. He didn't get bit*.::

Brahe cut in. ::Seaborg, when you're in combat, letting a squad mate get killed because of a bug bite is the sort of thing that gets you on the unfortunate side of an airlock,:: he said. ::Keep it in mind. Dirac, keep moving.::

Jared closed his eyes and put one foot in front of the other.

::What does Seaborg have against me, anyway?:: Jared asked Pauling. The two of them were practicing fighting with their combat knives. The squad members practiced for five minutes with each other member of the squad, with their integration sense on full. Fighting someone who was intimately aware of your internal state of mind made it an interesting extra challenge.

::You really don't know?:: Pauling said, circling with her knife held casually in her left hand. ::It's two things. One, he's just a jerk. Two, he likes me.::

Jared stopped circling. ::What?:: he said, and Pauling attacked viciously, feinting right and then slashing upward toward Jared's neck with her left hand. Jared stumbled backward and right to avoid the slashing; Pauling's knife switched hands and stabbed downward, missing Jared's leg by about a centimeter. Jared righted himself and settled into a defensive position.

::You distracted me,:: he said, circling again.

::You distracted yourself,:: Pauling said. ::I just took advantage of it when it happened.::

::You won't be happy until you cut open an artery,:: Jared said.

::I won't be happy until you shut up and focus on trying to kill me with that knife,:: Pauling said.

::You know,:: Jared began, and suddenly leaned back; he felt Pauling's intent to slash a fraction of a second before she made her lunge. Before she could pull back Jared leaned back in, inside the reach of her extended arm, and brought up the blade in his right hand to touch it lightly to her rib cage. Before it got there Pauling brought her head up and jammed it into the bottom of Jared's jaw. There was an audible *clack* as Jared's teeth slammed together; Jared's field of vision whited out. Pauling took advantage of Jared's stunned pause to step back and sweep his legs out from under him, spilling him flat on his back. When Jared came to, Pauling had pinned his arms with her legs and held her knife directly on top of a carotid artery.

::*You know,*:: Pauling said, mocking Jared's last words, ::if this were real combat I'd have sliced four of your arteries by now and moved on to whoever was next.:: Pauling sheathed her knife, and took her knees off his arms.

::Good thing we're not in real combat,:: Jared said, and propped himself up. ::About Seaborg—::

Pauling punched Jared square in the nose; his head snapped back. Pauling's knife was back at his throat, and her legs pinning his arms, a fraction of a second later.

::What the hell?:: Jared said.

::Our five minutes aren't up,:: Pauling said. ::We're still supposed to be fighting.::

::But you—:: Jared began. Pauling jabbed him in the neck and drew SmartBlood. Jared exclaimed aloud.

::There's no "but you—":: Pauling said. ::Jared, I like you, but I've noticed that you don't *focus*. We're friends, and I know you think that means that we can have a nice conversation while we're doing this. But I swear to you that the next time you give me an opening like you did just now, I'm going to cut your throat. Your SmartBlood will *probably* keep you from dying. And it'll keep you from thinking that just because we're *friends* doesn't mean I won't seriously hurt you. I like you too much. And I don't want you to die in real combat because you're thinking about something else. The things we'll be fighting in real combat aren't going to pause for conversation.::

::You'd watch out for me in combat,:: Jared said.

::You know I would,:: Pauling said. ::But this integration thing only goes so far, Jared. You have to watch out for yourself.::

Brahe told them their five minutes were up. Pauling let Jared off the floor. ::I'm serious, Jared,:: Pauling said, after she hauled him up. ::Pay attention next time, or I'll cut you bad.::

::I know,:: Jared said, and touched his nose. ::Or punch me.::

::True,:: Pauling said, and smiled. ::I'm not picky.::

::So all that about Seaborg liking you was just to distract me,:: Jared said.

::Oh, no,:: Pauling said. ::It's completely true.::

::Oh,:: Jared said.

Pauling laughed aloud. ::There you go, getting distracted again,:: she said.

Sarah Pauling was one of the first to get shot; she and Andrea Gell-Mann were ambushed as they were scouting a small valley. Pauling went down immediately, shot in the head and the neck; Gell-Mann managed to identify the locations of the shooters before a trio of shots in the chest and abdomen brought her down. In both cases their integration with the rest of the squad collapsed; it felt as if they were ripped out bodily from the squad's pooled consciousness. Others fell in short order, gutting the squad and sending its remaining members into disarray.

It was a bad war game for the 8th.

Jerry Yukawa compounded the problem by getting shot in the leg. The training suit he was wearing registered the "hit" and froze the mobility to the limb; Yukawa fell midstride and barely kicked his way behind the boulder Katherine Berkeley had gotten behind a few seconds before.

::You were supposed to lay down suppressing fire,:: Yukawa said, accusingly.

::I *did*,:: Berkeley said. ::I *am*. There is one of me and five of them. *You* do better::

The five members of the 13th Training Squad who had trapped Yukawa and Berkeley behind the boulder sent another volley their way. The members of the 13th felt the simulated mechanical kick of their training rifles while their BrainPals visually and aurally simulated the bullets tearing down the tiny cul-de-sac of a valley; Yukawa and Berkeley's BrainPals correspondingly simulated some of these bullets smacking the bulk of the boulder and others whining as they shot past. The bullets weren't real but they were as real as fake could get.

::We could use a little help here,:: Yukawa said to Steven Seaborg, who was the commander for the exercise.

::We hear you,:: Seaborg said, and then turned to look at Jared, his only other surviving soldier, who was standing mutely looking at him. Four members of the 8th were still standing (only figuratively speaking in the case of Yukawa), while seven members of the 13th were roaming the forest. The odds weren't good.

::Stop looking at me like that,:: Seaborg said. ::This isn't my fault.::

::I didn't say anything,:: Jared said.

::You were thinking it,:: Seaborg said.

::I wasn't thinking it, either,:: Jared said. ::I was reviewing data.::

::Of what?:: Seaborg asked.

::Of how the 13th moves and thinks,:: Jared said. ::From the other members of the 8th before they died. I'm trying to see if there's something we can use.::

::Can you do it a little quicker?:: Yukawa said. ::Things are looking mighty bleak on this end.::

Jared looked over to Seaborg. Seaborg sighed. ::Fine,:: he said. ::I'm open to suggestion. What have you got.::

::You're going to think I'm crazy,:: Jared said. ::But there's something I've noticed. So far, neither us or them look up very much.::

Seaborg looked up into the forest canopy, looking at the sunlight peek through the canopy of native Terran trees and their Phoenix equivalent, thick, bamboo-like stalks that threw off impressive branches. The two types of flora did not compete genetically—they were naturally incompatible because they developed on different worlds—but they competed for sunlight, reaching as far into the sky as possible and branching thickly to offer scaffolding for leaves and leaf-equivalents to do their photosynthetic work.

::We don't look up because there's nothing up there but trees,:: Seaborg said.

Jared started counting off seconds in his head. He got as far as seven before Seaborg said, ::Oh.::

::Oh,:: Jared agreed. He popped up a map. ::We're here. Yukawa and Berkeley are here. There's forest all the way between here and there.::

::And you think we can get from here to there in the trees,:: Seaborg said.

::That's not the question,:: Jared said. ::The question is whether we can do it fast enough to keep Yukawa and Berkeley alive, and quietly enough not to get ourselves killed.::

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Jared quickly discovered that walking through the trees was an idea better in theory than in execution. He and Seaborg almost fell twice within the first two minutes; moving from branch to branch required

rather more coordination than either expected. The Phoenix trees' branches were not nearly as load bearing as they assumed and the Terran trees featured a surprising number of dead branches. Their progress was slower and louder than they would have liked.

A rustling came from the east; in separate trees Jared and Seaborg hugged trunks and froze. Two members of the 13th walked out of the brush thirty meters away and six meters below Jared's position. The two were alert and wary, looking and listening for their quarry. They didn't look up.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jared saw Seaborg slowly reach toward his Empee. ::Wait,:: Jared said. ::We're still in their peripheral vision. Wait until we're behind them.:: The two soldiers edged forward, putting Jared and Seaborg behind them; Seaborg nodded to Jared. They silently unslung their Empees, stabilized as best they could, and sighted in on the backs of the soldiers. Seaborg gave the order; bullets flew in a short burst. The soldiers stiffened and fell.

::The rest have Yukawa and Berkeley pinned down,:: Seaborg said. ::Let's get cracking.:: He set off. Jared was amused at how Seaborg's take-charge spirit, so recently dampened, had suddenly returned.

Ten minutes later, Yukawa and Berkeley were down to the last of their ammunition, and Jared and Seaborg caught sight of the remaining members of the 13th. To the left of them, eight meters below, two soldiers were camped behind a large fallen tree; to the right and about thirty meters forward, another pair were behind a collection of boulders. These soldiers were keeping Yukawa and Berkeley busy while the fifth soldier quietly flanked their position. All of them had their backs to Jared and Seaborg.

::I'll take the ones by the log; you take the ones at the boulders,:: Seaborg said. ::I'll tell Berkeley about the flanker but tell her not to get him until we get our guys. No point giving ourselves away.:: Jared nodded; now that Seaborg was feeling confident, his planning was getting better. Jared filed that datum away to consider later, and moved to steady himself in their tree, putting his back against the trunk and hooking his left foot under a lower branch for additional support.

Seaborg moved one branch lower on the tree to get around a branch that was impeding his sight line. The branch he stepped on, dead,

cracked loudly under his weight and collapsed, falling out of the tree in what seemed the loudest possible way. Seaborg lost his footing and grabbed wildly at the branch below where he had stepped, dropping his Empee; four soldiers on the ground turned, looked up and saw him dangling there helplessly. They raised their weapons.

::Shit,:: Seaborg said, and looked up at Jared.

Jared fired in automatic-burst mode at the two soldiers at the boulders. One seized up and fell; the other dove around the boulders. Jared swiveled and fired on the soldiers at the log; he didn't hit anything but unnerved them long enough to switch his Empee to guided-missile mode and fire at the space between the two soldiers. The simulated rocket peppered both with virtual bits of shrapnel. They fell. Jared turned just in time to see the remaining soldier at the boulder lining up her shot. He launched a guided missile at her as she pulled her trigger. Jared felt his ribs go stiff and painful as his training suit constricted, and fumbled his Empee. He'd been shot, but the fact he didn't drop out of the tree told him he was still alive.

Training exercise! Jared was so pumped full of adrenaline that he thought he might pee himself.

::A little help here,:: Seaborg said, and reached over with his left hand for Jared to pull him up just as the fifth soldier, who had circled back, shot him in the right shoulder. Seaborg's entire arm stiffened in its suit; he let go of the branch he was dangling from. Jared grabbed at his left hand and caught him before his fall had gained momentum. Jared's left leg, still hooked under its branch by the foot, strained painfully from the additional load put on it.

On the ground, the soldier lined up his shot; virtual bullets or not, Jared knew if he were shot the stiffening of his suit would make him drop Seaborg and probably fall himself. Jared reached over with his right hand, grabbed his combat knife and threw hard. The knife buried itself in the meat of the soldier's left thigh; the soldier collapsed, screaming and pawing gingerly at the knife until Berkeley came up behind him and shot him into immobility.

::The 8th wins the war game,:: Jared heard Brahe say. ::I'm relaxing the training suits now for everyone who is still frozen. Next war game matchups in thirty minutes.:: The pressure on Jared's right side was

suddenly and considerably relieved, as was the stiffness of Seaborg's suit. Jared hauled him up and then they both carefully picked their way to the forest floor to retrieve their weapons.

The unfrozen members of the 13th were waiting for them, breaking off from their squad mate, who was still moaning on the ground. ::You fuck,:: one of them said, getting directly into Jared's face. ::You threw a knife into Charlie. You're not supposed to try to *kill* anyone. That's why it's called a war *game*.::

Seaborg jammed in between Jared and the soldier. ::Tell that to your friend, asshole,:: he said. ::If your friend had shot us, I would have dropped eight meters without any way to control my fall. He didn't seem particularly worried about *me* dying as he was lining up his shot. Jared knifing your friend saved my life. And your friend will *survive*. So fuck him, and fuck you.::

Seaborg and the soldier sized each other up for another few seconds before the other soldier turned his head, spat on the ground, and walked back to his squad mate.

::Thanks,:: Jared said to Seaborg.

Seaborg glanced over to Jared, and then to Yukawa and Berkeley. ::Let's get out of here,:: he said. ::We've got another war game.:: He stomped off. The three of them followed.

On the way back, Seaborg dropped back to pace Jared. ::It was a good idea to use the trees,:: he said. ::And I'm glad you caught me before I dropped. Thank you.::

::You're welcome,:: Jared said.

::I still don't like you much,:: Seaborg said. ::But I'm not going to have a problem with you anymore.::

::I'll take that,:: Jared said. ::It's a start, anyway.::

Seaborg nodded and picked up his pace again. He was silent the rest of the way in.

"Well, look who we have here," Lieutenant Cloud said, as Jared entered the shuttle with the other former members of the 8th. They were on their way back to Phoenix Station for their first assignments. "It's my pal Jared."

"Hello, Lieutenant Cloud," Jared said. "It's good to see you again."

"It's Dave," Cloud said. "Done with your training, I see. Damn, I wish my training had just been two weeks."

"We still cover a lot," Jared said.

"I don't doubt that in the least," Cloud said. "So what's your assignment, Private Dirac? Where will you be headed?"

"I've been assigned to the *Kite,*" Jared said. "Me and two of my friends, Sarah Pauling and Steven Seaborg." Jared pointed at Pauling, who had already sat down; Seaborg had yet to get on the shuttle.

"I've seen the *Kite,*" Cloud said. "Newer ship. Nice lines. Never been on it, of course. You Special Forces types keep to yourselves."

"That's what they tell me," Jared said. Andrea Gell-Mann came on board, bumping Jared slightly. She pinged an apology to him; Jared looked over and smiled.

"Looks like it's going to be a full-up flight," Cloud said. "You can sit up in the copilot's seat again if you like."

"Thanks," Jared said, and glanced over to Pauling. "I think I'll sit with my other friends this time."

Cloud looked over at Pauling. "That's entirely understandable," Cloud said. "Although remember you owe me some new jokes. I hope in all that training you did they gave you some time to work on your sense of humor."

Jared paused for a minute, recalling his first conversation with Gabriel Brahe. "Lieutenant Cloud, did you ever read *Frankenstein?*" he asked.

"Never did," Cloud said. "I know the story. Saw the most recent movie version not too long ago. The monster talked, which I'm told means it's closer to the actual book than not."

"What did you think of it?" Jared said.

"It was all right," Cloud said. "The acting was a little over-the-top. I felt sorry for the monster. And the Dr. Frankenstein character was something of an asshole. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," Jared said, and nodded toward the seating compartment, which was now almost completely full. "We all read it. Gave us a lot to think about."

"Ah," said Cloud. "I see. Jared, allow me to share with you my philosophy of human beings. It can be summed up in four words: I like good people. You seem like good people. I can't say that's all that matters to everyone, but it's what matters to me."

"That's good to know," Jared said. "I think my philosophy runs the same way."

"Well then, we're going to get along just fine," Cloud said. "Now: Any new jokes?"

"I might have a few," Jared said.

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SIX

"We'll talk out loud here, if you don't mind," General Szilard said to Jane Sagan. "It makes the waitstaff nervous to see two people staring intently at each other without actually making any sounds. If they don't see we're talking, they'll come over every other minute to see if there's anything we need. It's distracting."

"As you wish," Sagan said.

The two of them sat in the general's mess, with Phoenix spinning above them. Sagan stared. Szilard followed her gaze.

"It's amazing, isn't it," he said.

"It is," Sagan said.

"You can see the planet out of any portal on the station, at least some of the time. But no one ever looks," Szilard said. "And then you come here, and you just can't stop staring at it. I can't, in any event." He pointed to the crystal dome that encased them. "This dome was a gift, did you know that?" Sagan shook her head. "The Ala gave it to us as we built this station. It's diamond, this whole thing. They said it was a natural diamond that they carved out of an even larger crystal they hauled up from the core of one of their system's gas giants. The Ala were amazing engineers, so I've read. The story might even be true."

"I'm not familiar with the Ala," Sagan said.

"They're extinct," Szilard said. "A hundred fifty years ago they got into a war with the Obin over a colony. They had an army of clones and the means to make those clones quickly, and for a while it looked like they were going to beat the Obin. Then the Obin tailored a virus

keyed to the clones' genetics. The virus was initially harmless and transmitted by air, like a flu. Our scientists estimated it spread through the entire Alaite army in about a month, and then a month after that the virus matured and begun to attack the cellular reproduction cycle of every single Ala military clone. The victims literally dissolved."

"All at once?" Sagan asked.

"It took about a month," Szilard said. "Which is why our scientists estimated it took that long to infect the entire army in the first place. With the Alaite army out of the way the Obin wiped out the civilian population in short order. It was a fast and brutal genocide. The Obin are not a compassionate species. Now all the Alaite planets are owned by the Obin, and the Colonial Union learned two things. One, clone armies are a very bad idea. Two, stay out of the way of the Obin. Which we have done, until now."

Sagan nodded. The Special Forces battle cruiser *Kite* and her crew had recently begun recon and stealth raids in Obin territory, to gauge the Obin's strength and response capabilities. It was dangerous work since the Obin were unforgiving of assaults, and technically speaking the Obin and the Colonial Union were not in a state of hostilities. Knowledge of the Obin-Rraey-Eneshan alliance was a closely guarded secret; the majority of the Colonial Union and the CDF were unaware of the alliance and its threat to humans. The Eneshans even maintained a diplomatic presence on Phoenix, in the Colonial capital of Phoenix City. Strictly speaking, they were allies.

"Do you want to talk about the Obin raids?" Sagan said. In addition to being a squad leader on the *Kite,* she was the ship's intelligence officer, charged with force assessment. Most Special Forces officers held more than one post and also led combat squads; it kept the ship rosters lean, and keeping officers in combat positions appealed to the Special Forces' sense of mission. When you are born to protect humanity, no one is above combat.

"Not now," Szilard said. "This isn't the place for it. I wanted to talk to you about one of your new soldiers. The *Kite* has three new recruits, and two of them will be under you."

Sagan bristled. "They will, and that's a problem. I had only one hole in my squad, but I have two replacements. You took one of my

veterans to make room." Sagan remembered the helpless look on Will Lister's face when his transfer order to the *Peregrine* came through.

"The *Peregrine* is a new ship and it needs some experienced hands," Szilard said. "I assure you there are other squad leaders on other ships just as irritated as you. The *Kite* had to give up one of its veterans, and as it happens I had a recruit I wanted to place under you. So I had the *Peregrine* take one of yours."

Sagan opened her mouth to complain again, then thought better of it and clammed up, stewing. Szilard watched the play of emotions on her face. Most Special Forces soldiers would have said the first thing that came into their heads, an artifact of not having social niceties banged into their head through a childhood and adolescence. Sagan's self-control was one of the reasons why she had come to Szilard's attention; that and other factors.

"Which recruit are we talking about?" Sagan said finally.

"Jared Dirac," Szilard said.

"What's so special about him?" Sagan asked.

"He's got Charles Boutin's brain in him," Szilard said, and watched again as Sagan fought back an immediate visceral response.

"And you think this is a *good* idea," is what eventually came out of her mouth.

"It gets better," Szilard said, and sent over Dirac's entire classified file, complete with technical material. Sagan sat silently, digesting the material; Szilard sat, watching the junior officer. After a minute one of the mess staff approached their table and asked if there was anything they needed. Szilard ordered tea. Sagan ignored the waiter.

"All right, I'll bite," Sagan said, after she was done examining the file. "Why are you sticking me with a traitor?"

"Boutin's the traitor," Szilard said. "Dirac has just got his brain."

"A brain that you tried to imprint with a traitor's consciousness," Sagan said.

"Yes," Szilard said.

"I submit the question to your attention once more," Sagan said.

"Because you have experience with this sort of thing," Szilard said.

"With traitors?" Sagan asked, confused.

"With unconventional Special Forces members," Szilard said. "You once temporarily had a realborn member of the CDF under your command. John Perry." Sagan stiffened slightly at the name; Szilard noted it but chose not to comment. "He did quite well under you," Szilard said. This last sentence was a bit of an ironic understatement; during the Battle of Coral, Perry carried Sagan's unconscious and injured body over several hundred meters of battlefield to get her medical attention, and then located a key piece of enemy technology as the building it was in collapsed around him.

"The credit for that goes to Perry, not me," Sagan said. Szilard sensed another play of emotion from Sagan at Perry's name, but again left it on the table.

"You are too modest," Szilard said, and paused as the waiter delivered the tea. "My point is, Dirac is something of a hybrid," he continued. "He's Special Forces, but he may also be something else. I want someone who has experience with something else."

"'Something else,'" Sagan repeated. "General, am I hearing that you think Boutin's consciousness is actually somewhere inside Dirac?"

"I didn't say that," Szilard said, in a tone that implied that perhaps he had.

Sagan considered this and addressed the implicit rather than the expressed. "You are aware, of course, that the *Kite*'s next series of missions will have us engaging both the Rraey and the Enesha," she said. "The Eneshan missions in particular are ones of great delicacy." *And ones I needed Will Lister for,* Sagan thought, but did not say.

"I am of course aware," Szilard agreed, and reached for his tea.

"You don't think having someone with a possibly emergent traitorous personality might be a *risk,*" Sagan said. "A risk not only to his mission but to others serving with him."

"Obviously it's a risk," Szilard said, "for which I rely on your experience to deal with. But he may also turn out to be a trove of critical information. Which will also need to be dealt with. In addition to everything else, you're an intelligence officer. You're the ideal officer for this soldier."

"What did Crick have to say about this?" Sagan said, referring to Major Crick, the commanding officer of the *Kite*.

"He didn't have anything to say about it because I haven't told him," Szilard said. "This is need-to-know material, and I've decided he doesn't need to know. As far as he knows he simply has three new soldiers."

"I don't like this," Sagan said. "I don't like this at all."

"I didn't ask you to like it," Szilard said. "I'm telling you to deal with it." He sipped his tea.

"I don't want him playing a critical role in any of the missions that deal with the Rraey or the Enesha," Sagan said.

"You'll treat him no differently from any other soldier under your command," Szilard said.

"Then he could get killed like any other soldier," Sagan said.

"Then for your sake you'd better hope it's not by friendly fire," Szilard said, and set down his cup.

Sagan was silent again. The waiter approached; Szilard impatiently waved him off.

"I want to show this file to someone," Sagan said, pointing to her head.

"It's classified, for obvious reasons," Szilard said. "Everyone who needs to know about it already does, and we don't want to spread it around to anyone else. Even *Dirac* doesn't know about his own history. We want to keep it that way."

"You're asking me to take on a soldier who has the capability to be an *immense* security risk," Sagan said. "The least you can do is let me prepare myself. I know a specialist in human brain function and BrainPal integration. I think his insights on this could be useful."

Szilard considered this. "This is someone you trust," he said.

"I can trust him with this," Sagan said.

"Do you know his security clearance?" Szilard asked.

"I do," Sagan said.

"Is it high enough for something like this?"

"Well," Sagan said. "That's where things get interesting."

"Hello, Lieutenant Sagan," Administrator Cainen said, in English. The pronunciation was bad, but that was hardly Cainen's fault; his mouth

was not well formed for most human languages.

"Hello, Administrator," Sagan said. "You're learning our language."

"Yes," Cainen said. "I have time to learn, and little to do." Cainen pointed to a book, written in Ckann, the predominant Rraey language, nestled next to a PDA. "Only two books here in Ckann. I had choice of language book or religion book. I chose language. Human religion is…"—Cainen searched his small store of English words—"…harder."

Sagan nodded toward the PDA. "Now that you have a computer, you should have more reading options."

"Yes," Cainen said. "Thank you for getting that to me. It makes me happy."

"You're welcome," Sagan said. "But the computer comes with a price."

"I know," Cainen said. "I have read files you asked me to read."

"And?" Sagan said.

"I must change to Ckann," Cainen said. "My English does not have many words."

"All right," Sagan said.

"I've looked at the files concerning Private Dirac in depth," Cainen said, in the harsh but rapid consonants of the Ckann language. "Charles Boutin was a genius for finding a way to preserve the consciousness wave outside of the brain. And you people are *idiots* for how you tried to stuff that consciousness back in."

"Idiots," Sagan said, and cracked the smallest of smiles, the translation of the word in Ckann coming from a small speaker attached to a lanyard around her neck. "Is that your professional assessment, or just an editorial comment?"

"It's both," Cainen said.

"Tell me why," Sagan said. Cainen moved to send files from his PDA to her, but Sagan held up her hand. "I don't need the technical details," she said. "I just want to know if this Dirac is going to be a danger to my troops and my mission."

"All right," Cainen said, and paused for a moment. "The brain, even a human one, is like a computer. It's not a perfect analogy, but it works for what I'm going to tell you. Computers have three components for their operation: There's the hardware, there's the software, and there's

the data file. The software runs on the hardware, and the file runs on the software. The hardware can't open the file without the software. If you place a file on a computer that lacks the necessary software, all it can do is sit there. Do you understand me?"

"So far," Sagan said.

"Good," Cainen said. He reached over and tapped Sagan on the head; she suppressed an urge to snap off his finger. "Follow: The brain is the hardware. The consciousness is the file. But with your friend Dirac, you're missing the software."

"What's the software?" Sagan asked.

"Memory," Cainen said. "Experience. Sensory activity. When you put Boutin's consciousness into his brain, that brain lacked the experience to make any sense of it. If that consciousness is still in Dirac's brain—*if*—it's isolated and there's no way to access it."

"Newborn Special Forces soldiers are conscious from the moment they are woken up," Sagan said. "But we also lack experience and memory."

"That's not *consciousness* they're experiencing," Cainen said, and Sagan could sense the disgust in his voice. "Your damned BrainPal forces open sensory channels artificially and offers the illusion of consciousness, and your brain knows it." Cainen pointed to his PDA again. "Your people gave me a rather wide range of access to brain and BrainPal research. Did you know this?"

"I did," Sagan said. "I asked them to let you look at any file you needed to help me."

"Because you knew that I would be a prisoner for the rest of my life, and that even if I could escape I would soon be dead of the disease you gave me. So it couldn't *hurt* to give me access," Cainen said.

Sagan shrugged.

"Hmmmp," Cainen said, and continued. "Do you know that there's no explainable reason why a Special Forces soldier's brain absorbs information so much more quickly than a regular CDF? They're both unaltered human brains; they're both the same BrainPal computer. Special Forces brains are preconditioned in a different way from the regular soldiers' brains, but not in a way that should noticeably speed up the rate at which the brains process information. And yet the Special

Forces brain sucks down information and processes it at an incredible rate. Do you know why? *It's defending itself,* Lieutenant. Your average CDF soldier already has a consciousness, and the experience to use it. You Special Forces soldiers have nothing. Your brain senses the artificial consciousness your BrainPal is pressing on it and rushes to build its own as quickly as it can, before that artificial consciousness permanently deforms it. Or kills it."

"No Special Forces soldiers have died because of their BrainPal," Jane said.

"Oh, no, not *now,*" Cainen said. "But I wonder what you would find if you went back far enough."

"What do you know?" Sagan asked.

"I know nothing," Cainen said, mildly. "It's merely idle speculation. But the point here is that you can't compare Special Forces waking up with 'consciousness' with what you were trying to do with Private Dirac. It's not the same thing. It's not even close."

Sagan changed the subject. "You said that it's possible Boutin's consciousness might not even be in Dirac's brain anymore," she said.

"It's possible," Cainen said. "The consciousness needs input; without it, it dissipates. That's one reason why it's near impossible to keep a consciousness pattern coherent outside the brain, and why Boutin's a genius for doing it. My suspicion is that if Boutin's consciousness was in there, it's already leaked away, and you've got just another soldier on your hands. But there's no way to tell whether it's in there or not. Its pattern would be subsumed by Private Dirac's consciousness."

"If it *is* in there, what would wake it up?" Sagan asked.

"You're asking me to speculate?" Cainen asked. Sagan nodded. "The reason you couldn't access the Boutin consciousness in the first place is that the brain didn't have memory and experience. Maybe as your Private Dirac accumulates experiences, one will be close enough in its substance to unlock some part of that consciousness."

"And then he'd become Charles Boutin," Sagan said.

"He might," Cainen said. "Or he might not. Private Dirac has his own consciousness now. His own sense of self. If Boutin's consciousness woke up, it wouldn't be the only consciousness in there.

It's up to you to decide whether that's good or bad, Lieutenant Sagan. I can't tell you that, or what would truly happen if Boutin got woken up."

"Those are the things I needed you to tell me," Sagan said.

Cainen gave the Rraey equivalent of a chuckle. "Get me a lab," he said. "Then I might be able to give you some answers."

"I thought you said you would never help us," Sagan said.

Cainen switched back to English. "Much time to think," he said. "Too much time. Language lessons not enough." And then back to Ckann. "And this doesn't help you against my people. But it helps *you*."

"Me?" Sagan said. "I know why you helped me this time; I bribed you with computer access. Why would you help me beyond this? I made you a prisoner."

"And you struck me with a disease that will kill me if I don't get a daily dose of antidote from my enemies," Cainen said. He reached into the shallow desk moulded from the wall of the cell and pulled out a small injector. "My medicine," he said. "They allow me to self-administer. Once I decided not to inject myself, to see if they would let me die. I'm still here, so that's the answer to that. But they let me writhe on the floor for hours first. Just like *you* did, come to think of it."

"None of this explains why you would want to help me," Sagan said.

"Because you *remembered* me," Cainen said. "To everyone else, I am just another one of your many enemies, barely worth providing a book to keep me from going insane with boredom. One day they could simply forget my antidote and let me die, and it would be all the same to them. You at least see me as having value. In the very small universe I live in now, that makes you my best and only friend, enemy though you are."

Sagan stared at Cainen, remembering the *haughtiness* of him the first time they met. He was pitiful and craven now, and that momentarily struck Sagan as the saddest thing she'd ever seen.

"I'm sorry," she said, and was surprised the words came out of her mouth.

Another Rraey chuckle from Cainen. "We were planning to destroy your people, Lieutenant," Cainen said. "And we still might. You needn't feel too apologetic."

Sagan had nothing to say to that. She signaled to the brig officer that she was ready to leave; a guard came and stood with an Empee while the cell door opened.

As the door slid shut behind her, she turned back to Cainen. "Thank you for your help. I will ask about a lab," she said.

"Thank you," Cainen said. "I won't get my hopes up."

"That's probably a good idea," Sagan said.

"And Lieutenant," Cainen said. "A thought. Your Private Dirac will be participating in your military actions."

"Yes," Sagan said.

"Watch him," Cainen said. "In humans and Rraey both, the stress of battle leaves permanent marks on our brains. It's a primal experience. If Boutin is still in there, it might be war that brings him out. Either by itself or through some combination of experiences."

"How do you suggest I watch him in battle?" Sagan asked.

"That's your department," Cainen said. "Except for when you captured me, I've never been to war. I couldn't begin to tell you. But if you're worried about Dirac, that's what I would do if I were you. You humans have an expression: 'Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.' It seems like your Private Dirac could be both. I'd keep him very close indeed."

The *Kite* caught the Rraey cruiser napping.

The Skip Drive was a touchy piece of technology. It made interstellar travel possible not by propelling ships faster than the speed of light, which was impossible, but by punching through space-time and placing spaceships (or anything equipped with a Skip Drive) into any spot within that universe those using the Skip Drive pleased.

(Actually, this wasn't exactly true; on a logarithmic scale Skip Drive travel became less reliable the more space there was between the initiation point and the destination point. The cause of what was called

the Skip Drive Horizon Problem was not entirely understood, but its effects were lost ships and crews.

This kept humans and other races that used the Skip Drive in the same interstellar "neighborhood" as their home planets in the short run; if a race wanted to keep control of its colonies, as almost all did, its colonial expansion was ruled by the sphere defined by the Skip Drive horizon. In one sense this point was moot; thanks to the intense competition for real estate in the neighborhood humanity lived in, no intelligent race save one had a reach that came close to its own Skip Drive horizon. The exception was the Consu, whose technology was so advanced relative to the other races in the local space that it was an open question as to whether it used the Skip Drive at all.)

Among the many quirks of the Skip Drive, which had to be tolerated if one were to employ it, were its departure and arrival needs. When departing, the Skip Drive needed relatively "flat" space-time, which meant the Skip Drive could only be activated when the ship using it was well outside the gravity well of close-by planets; this required travel in space using engines. But a ship using the Skip Drive could arrive as close to a planet as it wanted—it could even, theoretically, arrive on a planet surface, if a navigator confident enough of his or her skill could be found to do it. While landing a spacecraft on a planet via Skip Drive navigation was officially and strongly discouraged by the Colonial Union, the Colonial Defense Forces recognized the strategic value of sudden and unexpected arrivals.

When the *Kite* arrived over the planet its human settlers called Gettysburg, it popped into existence within a quarter of a light-second from the Rraey cruiser, and with its dual rail guns warmed up and ready to fire. It took the *Kite*'s prepared weapons crew less than a minute to orient and target the hapless cruiser, which only at the end could be seen trying to respond, and the magnetized rail-gun projectiles needed less than two and a third seconds to travel the distance between the *Kite* and its quarry. The sheer speed of the rail-gun projectiles was more than sufficient to pierce the hide of the Rraey craft and tunnel through its innards like a bullet through soft butter, but the projectile designers hadn't left it at that; the projectiles themselves were designed to expand explosively at the merest contact with matter.

An infinitesimal fraction of a second after the projectiles penetrated the Rraey craft, they fragmented and shards vectored crazily relative to their initial trajectory, turning the projectile into this universe's fastest shotgun blast. The expenditure of energy required to change these trajectories was naturally immense and slowed down the shards considerably. However, the shards had energy to spare, and it simply meant each shard had more time to damage the Rraey vessel before it exited the wounded ship and began a long and frictionless journey through space.

Thanks to the relative positions of the *Kite* and the Rraey cruiser, the first rail-gun projectile struck the Rraey cruiser forward and starboard; the fragments from this projectile tunneled through diagonally and upward, not-so-cleanly chewing through several levels of the ship and turning a number of the Rraey crew into bloody mist. The entrance wound of this projectile was a clean circle seventeen centimeters wide; the exit wound was a ragged hole ten meters wide with a gout of metal, flesh and atmosphere blasting silently into the vacuum.

The second rail-gun projectile entered aft of the first, following a parallel directory, but failed to fragment; its exit wound was only marginally larger than its entrance wound. It made up for this failure by breaching one of the engines of the Rraey craft. The cruiser's automatic damage controls slammed down bulkheads, isolating the damaged engine, and took the other two engines off-line to avoid a cascading failure. The Rraey ship was switched to emergency power, which offered it only a minimum of offensive and defensive options, none of which would be at all effective against the *Kite*.

The *Kite,* its own power partially drained (but recharging) through the use of the rail guns, sealed the deal by launching five conventional tactical nuclear missiles at the Rraey cruiser. It would take them more than a minute to reach the cruiser, but the *Kite* now had the luxury of time. The cruiser was the only Rraey ship in the area. A small flash issued forth from the Rraey ship: The doomed cruiser was launching a Skip drone, designed to quickly get to Skip distance and let the rest of the Rraey military know what happened to it. The *Kite* launched a sixth and final missile toward the drone, which would be overtaken and

destroyed less than ten thousand klicks from Skip distance. By the time the Rraey found out about their cruiser, the *Kite* would be light-years away.

Presently the Rraey cruiser was an expanding debris field, and Lieutenant Sagan and her 2nd Platoon received their clearance for their part of the mission.

Jared tried to calm the first-mission nerves, and the mild fear brought by the choppiness of the troop transport's descent into the Gettysburg atmosphere, by trying to close out distractions and focus his energies. Daniel Harvey, sitting next to him, was making that difficult.

::Goddamn wildcat colonists,:: Harvey said, as the troop transport plunged through the atmosphere. ::They go off and build illegal colonies and then come crying to us when some other fucking species is crawling up their holes.::

::Relax, Harvey,:: said Alex Roentgen. ::You're going to give yourself a migraine.::

::What I want to know is how these fuckers even manage to *get* to these places,:: Harvey said. ::The Colonial Union doesn't bring 'em out here. And you can't go anywhere without CU say-so.::

::Sure you can,:: Roentgen said. ::The CU doesn't control *all* interstellar travel, just the travel that humans do.::

::These colonists are human, Einstein,:: Harvey said.

::Hey,:: said Julie Einstein. ::Leave me out of this.::

::It's just an expression, Julie,:: Harvey said.

::The colonists are human, but the people who are transporting them *aren't,* you idiot,:: Roentgen said. ::Wildcat colonists buy transport from aliens the CU trades with, and the aliens take them where they want to go.::

::That's stupid,:: Harvey said, and looked around the platoon for agreement. Most of the platoon were either resting with their eyes closed or studiously avoiding the discussion; Harvey had a reputation as an argumentative blowhard. ::The CU could stop that if they wanted to. Tell the aliens to stop picking up wildcat passengers. That would save us from having to risk getting *our* asses shot off.::

From the forward seat, Jane Sagan turned her head toward Harvey. ::The CU doesn't want to stop wildcat colonists,:: she said, in a bored tone.

::Why the hell not?:: Harvey asked.

::They're troublemakers,:: Sagan said. ::The sort of person who will defy the CU and start a wildcat colony is the sort of person who could cause trouble at home if he wasn't allowed to go. The CU figures it's not worth the trouble. So they let them go, and look the other way. Then they're on their own.::

::Until they get in trouble,:: Harvey sneered.

::Usually even then,:: Sagan said. ::Wildcatters know what they're getting into.::

::Then what *are* we doing here?:: Roentgen said. ::Not to take Harvey's side, but these *are* wildcat colonists.::

::Orders,:: Sagan said, and closed her eyes, ending the discussion. Harvey snorted and was about to reply when the turbulence suddenly became especially bad.

::Looks like the Rraey on the ground just figured out we're up here,:: Chad Assisi said from the pilot's seat. ::We've got three more missiles on their way. Hang on, I'm going to try to burn them before they get too close.:: Several seconds later came a low, solid hum; the transport's defensive maser fired up to deal with the missiles.

::Why don't we just plaster these guys from orbit?:: Harvey said. ::We've done that before.::

::There are humans down there, aren't there?:: Jared said, venturing a comment. ::I'd guess we'd want to avoid using tactics that would injure or kill them.::

Harvey gave Jared the briefest of glances and then changed the subject.

Jared glanced over to Sarah Pauling, who gave him a shrug. In the week they had been attached to the 2nd Platoon, the best adjective to describe relations was *frosty*. Other members of the platoon were diffidently polite when forced to be but otherwise ignored the two of them whenever possible. Jane Sagan, the platoon's superior officer, let them know briefly that this was par for the course for new recruits

until their first combat mission. ::Just deal with it,:: she said, and returned to work of her own.

It made both Jared and Pauling uneasy. Being casually ignored was one thing, but the two of them were also denied full integration with the platoon. They were lightly connected and shared a common band for discussion and sharing information concerning the upcoming mission, but the intimate sharing offered by their training squad was not in evidence here. Jared looked back at Harvey and not for the first time wondered if integration was simply a training tool. If it was, it seemed cruel to offer it to people only to take it away later. But he'd seen evidence of integration among his platoon mates: the subtle movements and actions that suggested an unspoken common dialogue and a sensory awareness beyond one's own senses. Jared and Pauling yearned for it but also knew the lack of it was a test to see how they would respond.

To combat the lack of integration with their platoon, Jared and Pauling's integration was defensively intimate; they spent so much time in each other's heads that by the end of the week, despite their affection together, they were very nearly sick of each other. There was, they discovered, such a thing as too much integration. The two of them diluted their sharing slightly by inviting Steven Seaborg to integrate with them informally. Seaborg, who had been receiving the same cold shoulder from the 1st Platoon but who had no training mates in the platoon to keep him company, was almost pathetically grateful for the offer.

Jared glanced down at Jane Sagan and wondered if the platoon leader would tolerate having him and Sarah unintegrated during the mission; it seemed dangerous. For him and Pauling, at the very least.

As if responding to his thoughts, Sagan glanced up at him and then spoke. ::Assignments,:: she said, and sent a map of the tiny Gettysburg colony to the platoon with their assignments overlaid. ::Remember this is a sweep and clean. There's been no Skip drone activity, so either they're all dead or they're all herded somewhere where they can't get a message out. The idea is to clean out the Rraey with a minimum of structural damage to the colony. That's *minimal,* Harvey,:: staring pointedly at the soldier, who squirmed uncomfortably. ::I don't mind

blowing things up when necessary but anything we destroy is something these settlers have less of.::

::What?:: Roentgen said. ::Are you seriously suggesting we're going to let these people stay? If they're still alive?::

::They're wildcatters,:: Sagan said. ::We can't force them to act intelligently.::

::Well, we *could* force them,:: Harvey said.

::We *won't* force them,:: Sagan said. ::We have new people to take under our wings. Roentgen, you're responsible for Pauling. I'll take Dirac. The rest of you, two by two to your assignments. We land here:: —a small landing zone illuminated—::and I'll let you use your own creativity to get to where you need to be. Remember to note your surroundings and the enemy; you're looking for all of us.::

::Or at least *some* of us,:: Pauling said privately to Jared. Then the both of them felt the sensuous rush of integration, the hyper-awareness of having so many points of view overlaid on one's own. Jared struggled to control a gasp.

::Don't cream yourself,:: Harvey said, and there were a few pings of amusement in the platoon. Jared ignored this and drank in the emotional and informational gestalt offered by his platoon mates: the confidence in their abilities to confront the Rraey; a substrata of early planning for their paths to their mission destinations; a tense and subtle anticipatory excitement that seemed to have little to do with the combat to come; and shared communal feeling that taking care to keep structures intact was pointless, since the colonists were almost certainly dead already.

::Behind you,:: Jared heard Sarah Pauling say, and he and Jane Sagan turned and fired even as they received the image and data, from Pauling's distant point of view, of three Rraey soldiers moving silently but not invisibly around a small general-purpose building to ambush the pair. The trio stepped out into a hail of bullets from Jared and Sagan; one dropped dead while the other two broke and ran in separate directions.

Jared and Sagan quickly polled the viewpoints of the other members of the platoon to see who might pick up one or both of the fleeing soldiers. Everyone else was engaged, including Pauling, who had returned to her primary task of flushing out a Rraey sniper on the edge of the Gettysburg settlement. Sagan audibly sighed.

::Get that one,:: she said, taking off after the second. ::Try not to get killed.::

Jared followed the Rraey soldier, who used its powerful, birdlike legs to build a considerable lead on him. As Jared raced to catch up, the Rraey spun and shot wildly at him with a one-handed grip on its weapon; the kick knocked the gun up and out of the Rraey's hand. The bullets spat up dirt directly in front of Jared, who veered for cover as the weapon clattered to the ground. The Rraey ran on without retrieving its weapon and disappeared into the colony's motor pool garage.

::I could use some help,:: Jared said, at the bay of the garage.

::Join the club,:: Harvey said, from somewhere. ::These fuckers outnumber us at least two to one.::

Jared entered the garage through the bay. The quick glance showed that the only other way out was a door on the same wall as the bay and one of a series of windows designed to ventilate the garage. The windows were both high and small; it seemed unlikely the Rraey had gone through those. It was still somewhere inside the garage. Jared moved to one side and started a methodical search of the shop.

A knife shot out from a tarp on a low shelf and slashed Jared in his calf. The nanobotic fabric of Jared's military unitard stiffened where the knife blade made contact. Jared didn't receive a scratch. But his own shocked movement tripped him up; he went sprawling on the floor, ankle twisted, his Empee clattering out of his hand. The Rraey scrambled out of its hiding place before Jared could get to it, clambered over Jared and pushed the Empee with the fist that still held the knife. The Empee danced out of reach and the Rraey stabbed Jared's face, cutting him savagely in the cheek and drawing SmartBlood. Jared yelled; the Rraey scrambled off him and toward the Empee.

When Jared spun around the Rraey had the Empee trained on him, its elongated fingers awkwardly but solidly on the stock and trigger.

Jared froze. The Rraey squawked something and pulled the trigger.

Nothing. Jared remembered that the Empee was trained to his BrainPal; it wouldn't fire for a nonhuman. He cracked a smile in relief; the Rraey squawked again and jammed the Empee hard into Jared's face, tearing into the cheek it had already slashed. Jared screamed and scrambled back in pain. The Rraey threw the Empee onto a high shelf, out of the reach of both of them. It reached onto a counter to grab a tire rod and advanced on Jared, swinging viciously.

Jared blocked the swing with his arm; his unitard stiffened again but the hit made his arm ache in pain. On the next swing he reached to grab the rod but misjudged the speed of the approach; the rod came down hard on his fingers, breaking bones in the ring and middle fingers of his right hand and driving down his arm. The Rraey moved the iron sideways and clocked Jared in the head with it; he went down to his knees, dazed, retwisting the ankle he'd fallen on earlier. Jared groggily went for his combat knife with his left hand; the Rraey kicked the hand, hard, sending the knife spinning out of his grip. A second rapid kick tapped Jared on the chin, driving his teeth into his tongue, causing SmartBood to spurt into his mouth and over his teeth. The Rraey pushed him over, pulled out its knife, and bent down to cut Jared's throat. Jared's mind suddenly ricocheted back to a training session with Sarah Pauling, when she straddled him with her knife on his throat and told him he lacked focus.

He focused now.

Jared sucked in suddenly and spat a gobbet of SmartBlood at the Rraey's face and eye band. The creature recoiled, revulsed, giving Jared the time he needed to instruct his BrainPal to do with the SmartBlood on the Rraey's face what it did when it was ingested by the bloodsucking bug on Phoenix: combust.

The Rraey screamed as the SmartBlood began to burn into its face and eye band, dropping its knife as it clawed at its face. Jared grabbed the knife and drove it into the side of the Rraey's head. The Rraey issued an abrupt, surprised cluck and then went boneless, slumping backwards on the floor. Jared followed its example, lying silently, doing nothing but resting his eyes and becoming more and more aware of the heavy, acrid smell of smoldering Rraey.

::Get up,:: someone said to him some time later, and prodded him with a boot toe. Jared winced and looked up. It was Sagan. ::Come on, Dirac. We got them all. You can come out now.::

::I hurt,:: Jared said.

::Hell, Dirac,:: Sagan said. ::I hurt just looking at you.:: She motioned over to the Rraey. ::Next time, just shoot the damn thing.::

::I'll keep that in mind,:: Jared said.

::Speaking of which,:: Sagan said, ::where's your Empee?::

Jared looked up at the high shelf the Rraey had flung it onto. ::I think I need a ladder,:: Jared said.

::You need stitches,:: Sagan said. ::Your cheek is about to come off.::

::Lieutenant,:: Julie Einstein said. ::You're going to want to come over here. We found the settlers.::

::Any of them alive?:: Sagan said.

::God, no,:: Einstein said, and through the integration both Sagan and Jared felt her shudder.

::Where are you?:: Sagan asked.

::Um,:: Einstein said. ::Maybe you should come and see.::

A minute later Sagan and Jared were at the colony slaughterhouse.

::Fucking Rraey,:: Sagan said as they walked up. She turned to Einstein, who was waiting outside for her. ::They're in here?::

::They're here,:: Einstein said. ::In the cold room in the back.::

::All of them?:: Sagan asked.

::I think so. It's hard to tell,:: Einstein said. ::They're mostly in parts.::

The cold room was crammed with meat.

Special Forces soldiers gaped up at the skinned torsos on hooks. Barrels below the hooks were filled with offal. Limbs in various states of processing lay stacked on tables. On a separate table lay a collection of heads, skulls sawed open to extract the brains. Discarded heads rested in another barrel next to the table.

A small pile of unprocessed bodies was heaped under a tarp. Jared went to uncover it. Children lay underneath.

::Christ,:: Sagan said. She turned to Einstein. ::Get someone over to the colony administration offices,:: she said. ::Pull up any medical and genetic records you can find, and pictures of the colonists. We're going

to need them to identify people. Then get a couple of people to dig through trash cans.::

::What are we looking for?:: Einstein asked.

:: Scraps,:: Sagan said. ::Whoever the Rraey already ate.::

Jared heard Sagan give her orders as a buzz in his head. He crouched and stared, transfixed, at the pile of small bodies. At the top lay the body of a small girl, elfin features silent, relaxed and beautiful. He reached over and gently touched the girl's cheek. It was ice-cold.

Unaccountably Jared felt a hard stab of grief. He turned away with a retching sob.

Daniel Harvey, who had found the cold room with Einstein, stood over Jared. ::First time,:: he said.

Jared looked up. ::What?:: he said.

Harvey motioned to the bodies with his head. ::This is the first time you've seen children. Am I right?::

::Yes,:: Jared said.

::This is how it happens with us,:: Harvey said. ::The first time we see colonists, they're dead. The first time we see children, they're dead. The first time we see an intelligent creature who isn't human, it's dead or trying to kill us, so we have to kill it. Then *it's* dead. It took me months before I saw a live colonist. I've never seen a live child.::

Jared turned back to the pile. ::How old is this one?:: he asked.

::Shit, I don't know,:: Harvey said, but looked anyway. ::I'd guess three or four years old. Five, tops. And you know what's funny? She was older than both of us put together. She was older than both of us put together *twice*. It's a fucked-up universe, my friend.::

Harvey wandered away. Jared stared at the little girl for another minute, then covered her and the pile with the tarp. He went looking for Sagan, who he found outside the colony's administration building.

::Dirac,:: Sagan said as he approached. ::What do you think of your first mission?::

::I think it's pretty awful,:: Jared said.

::That it is,:: Sagan said. "Do you know why we're here? Why we're out here at a wildcat settlement?" she asked him.

It took Jared a second to realize she had spoken the words out loud. "No," he said, responding in kind.

"Because the leader of this settlement is the son of the Secretary of State for the Colonial Union," Sagan said. "The dumb bastard wanted to prove to his mother that the Colonial Union regulations against wildcat settlements were an affront to civil rights."

"Are they?" Jared asked.

Sagan looked over at Jared. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm just curious," Jared said.

"Maybe they are, and maybe they aren't," Sagan said. "But either way, the last place to prove that point would have been *this* planet. It's been claimed by the Rraey for years, even if they didn't have a settlement on it. I guess the asshole thought that because the CU beat the Rraey in the last war maybe they'd look the other way for fear of retaliation. Then ten days ago the spy satellite we put in over the planet got shot out of the sky by that cruiser we took out. It got a picture of the cruiser first. And here *we* are."

"It's a mess," Jared said.

Sagan laughed mirthlessly. "Now I've got to go back into that fucking cold room and test corpses until I find the secretary's son," she said. "Then I'll have the pleasure of telling her that the Rraey chopped up her son and his family for food."

"His family?" Jared asked.

"Wife," Sagan said, "and a daughter. Four years old."

Jared shuddered violently, thinking of the girl on the pile. Sagan watched him intently. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Jared said. "It just seems a waste."

"The wife and kid are a waste," Sagan said. "The dumb bastard who brought them here got what he deserved."

Jared shuddered again. "If you say so," he said.

"I do say so," Sagan said. "Now, come on. Time to identify the colonists, or what's left of them."

::Well,:: Sarah Pauling said to Jared, as he came out of the *Kite*'s infirmary. ::You sure don't do things the easy way.:: She reached out to his cheek, to the welt that remained there despite the nano-stitching. ::You can still see where you got cut.::

::It doesn't hurt,:: Jared said. ::Which is more than I can say about my ankle and my hand. The ankle wasn't broken, but the fingers will take a couple of days to fully heal.::

::Better that than being dead,:: Pauling said.

::This is true,:: Jared admitted.

::And you taught everybody a new trick,:: Pauling said. ::Things you didn't know you could do with SmartBlood. They're calling you Red-Hot Jared now.::

::Everybody knows you can get SmartBlood to heat up,:: Jared said. ::I saw people using it to fry up bugs on Phoenix all the time.::

::Yes, everyone uses it to smoke the little bugs,:: Pauling said, ::But it takes a certain kind of mind to think of using it to smoke the big bugs.::

::I wasn't really thinking about it,:: Jared said. ::I just didn't want to die.::

::Funny how that will make a person creative,:: Pauling said.

::Funny how it makes you focus,:: Jared said. ::I remembered you telling me I needed to work on that. I think you may have saved my life.::

::Good,:: Pauling said. ::Try to return the favor sometime.::

Jared stopped walking for a moment. ::What?:: Pauling asked.

::Do you feel that?:: Jared asked.

::Feel what?:: Pauling asked.

::I'm feeling like I really want to have sex,:: Jared said.

::Well, Jared,:: Pauling said. ::You stopping abruptly in a hallway is not usually how I know you really want to have sex.::

::Pauling, Dirac,:: Alex Roentgen said. ::Rec room. Now. Time for a little after-battle celebration.::

::Oooh,:: Pauling said. ::A celebration. Maybe there will be cake and ice cream.::

There was no cake or ice cream. There was an orgy. All the members of the 2nd Platoon were there, save one, in various stages of undress. Couples and trios lay on couches and cushions, kissing and pressing into each other.

::This is an after-battle celebration?:: Pauling asked.

::*The* after-battle celebration,:: Alex Roentgen said. ::Every battle we do this.::

::Why?:: Jared asked.

Alex Roentgen stared at Jared, mildly incredulous. ::You actually need a *reason* to have an orgy?:: Jared began to respond, but Roentgen held up his hand. ::One, because we've been through the valley of the shadow of death and come through the other side. And there's no better way to feel alive than this. And after the shit we've seen today, we need to get our minds off it right quick. Two, because as great as sex is, it's even better when everyone you're integrated with is doing it at the same time.::

::So this means you're not going to pull the plug on our integration?:: Pauling asked. She said it teasingly, but Jared sensed the smallest thread of anxiety in the question.

::No,:: Roentgen said, gently. ::You're one of us now. And it's not just sex. It's a deeper expression of communion and trust. Another level of integration.::

::That sounds suspiciously like bullshit to me,:: Pauling said, smiling.

Roentgen sent a ping of high amusement. ::Well, you know. I won't deny that we're in it for the sex too. But you'll see.:: He held out a hand to Pauling. ::Shall we?::

Pauling looked over at Jared, winked, and took Roentgen's hand. ::By all means,:: she said. Jared watched them walk off, and then felt a poke on his shoulder. He turned. Julie Einstein, nude and perky, stood there.

::I've come to test the theory that you are red-hot, Jared,:: she said.

Some indefinite time later Pauling found her way to Jared and lay next to him.

::This has been an interesting evening,:: she said.

::That's one way to put it,:: Jared said. Roentgen's comment that sex was different when everyone with whom you're integrated is involved turned out to be a rather dramatic understatement. Everyone but one, Jared corrected. ::I wonder why Sagan wasn't here,:: Jared said.

::Alex said she used to participate but now she doesn't,:: Pauling said. ::She stopped after a battle where she nearly died. That was a

couple of years ago. Alex said participation is strictly optional; no one gives her grief for it.::

At the name "Alex," Jared felt a sharp pang; he'd glimpsed Roentgen and Pauling together earlier while Einstein was on him. ::That would explain it,:: Jared said, awkwardly.

Pauling sat up on an arm. ::Did you have a good time? With this?:: she asked.

::You know I did,:: Jared said.

::I know,:: Pauling said. ::I could feel you in my head.::

::Yes,:: Jared said.

::And yet, you don't seem entirely happy,:: Pauling said.

Jared shrugged. ::I couldn't tell you why,:: he said.

Pauling reached over, kissed Jared lightly. ::You're cute when you're jealous,:: she said.

::I don't mean to be jealous,:: Jared said.

::No one means to be jealous, I think,:: Pauling said.

::I'm sorry,:: Jared said.

::Don't be,:: Pauling said. ::I'm happy we've been integrated. I'm pleased to be a part of this platoon. And *this* is a lot of fun. But you are special to me, Jared, and you always have been. You are my best beloved.::

::Best beloved,:: Jared agreed. ::Always.::

Pauling smiled widely. ::Glad to get that settled,:: she said, and reached down. ::Now,:: she said. ::Time for me to get the benefit of my best beloved privileges.::

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SEVEN

::Thirty klicks,:: Jane Sagan said. ::Everyone off the bus.::

The soldiers of the 2nd Platoon removed themselves from the troop transport and fell into the night sky over Dirluew, the capital city of the Eneshan nation. Below them, explosions pocked the sky; not the violent, potentially transport-shattering eruptions that would mark anti-craft defenses, but the pretty multicolored flashes that signaled fireworks. It was the final evening of Chafalan, the Eneshan celebration of rebirth and renewal. Eneshans worldwide were out in their streets, partying and carrying on in a manner appropriate for the time of day where they were, most the Eneshan equivalent of slightly drunk and horny.

Dirluew was especially raucous this Chafalan. In addition to the usual festivities the celebration this year had also included the Consecration of the Heir, in which Fhileb Ser, the Eneshan Heirarch, officially pronounced her daughter Vyut Ser as the future ruler of Enesha. To commemorate the consecration, Fhileb Ser had provided a sample of the royal jelly she fed to Vyut Ser and allowed a mass-produced synthetic version to be produced, in diluted form, placed in tiny jars and offered as gifts to the citizens of Dirluew for the final night of Chafalan.

In its natural form, and fed to a pre-metamorphic Eneshan, the royal jelly caused profound developmental changes that resulted in clear physical and mental advantages once the Eneshan developed into adult form. In its diluted and synthesized version, the royal jelly gave

adult Eneshans a truly excellent hallucinogenic buzz. Most of the citizens of Dirluew had consumed their jelly prior to the city's fireworks display and light show and were now sitting in their private gardens and public parks, clacking their mouthpieces together in the Eneshan equivalent of *ooooh* and *aaaaah* as the naturally brilliant and explosive nature of the fireworks was pharmaceutically extended across the entire Eneshan sensory spectrum.

Thirty klicks up (and descending rapidly), Jared could not see or hear the dazzled Eneshans, and the fireworks below were brilliant but distant, the sound of their explosions lost in the distance and the thin Eneshan stratosphere. Jared's perception was occupied with other things: the location of his squad mates, the rate of his descent and the maneuvering required to ensure he was both where he needed to be at landing and yet well out of the way when certain events transpired not too far in the future.

Locating his squad mates was the easiest task. Every member of the 2nd Platoon was blanked out visually and through most of the electromagnetic spectrum by their blackbody nanobiotic unitards and equipment covers, save for a small tightbeam transmitter/receiver each platoon member wore. These polled the position of the other platoon members before the jump and continued doing so at microsecond intervals since. Jared knew that Sarah Pauling was forty meters fore and starboard, Daniel Harvey sixty meters below and Jane Sagan two hundred meters above, the last out of their transport. The first time Jared participated in a nighttime high-altitude jump, not long after Gettysburg, he managed to lose the tightbeam signal and landed several klicks away from his squad, disoriented and alone. He received no end of shit for that.

Jared's final destination lay now less than twenty-five klicks below him, highlighted by his BrainPal, which also offered up a descent pathway computed to get him where he needed to be. The pathway was updated on the fly as the BrainPal took into consideration wind gusts and other atmospheric phenomena; it also tracked carefully around three closely grouped virtual columns, superimposed on Jared's vision. These columns stretched down from the heavens to terminate in three areas of a single building: the Heirarch's Palace, which served as both

the residence of Fhileb Ser and her court, and the official seat of the government.

What these three columns represented became apparent when Jared and the 2nd Platoon had descended to less than four kilometers and three particle beams appeared in the sky, lancing downward from the satellites the Special Forces had positioned in low orbit above Enesha. One beam was dim, one furiously bright and the third was dimmest of all and with a curious flicker. The citizenry of Dirluew cooed over the sight and the resonant thunderclap wall of sound that accompanied their appearance. In their simultaneously heightened and diminished state of awareness, they thought the beams were part of the city's light show. Only the invaders and the actual coordinators of Dirluew's light show initially knew any different.

Particle beam–producing satellites are not something the Enesha planetary defense grid would have failed to notice; noticing enemy weapons is what planetary defense grids are *for*. In this particular case, however, the satellites were well-disguised as a trio of repair tugs. The tugs had been planted months earlier—not long after the incident at Gettysburg—as part of the routine service fleet for the Colonial Union's diplomatic berths at one of Enesha's three major space stations. They did, in fact, work perfectly fine as tugs. Their rather unusually modified engines were not apparent externally or by internal systems checks, the latter due to clever software modifications that hid the engines' capabilities to all but the most determined of investigators.

The three tugs had been assigned to haul in the *Kite* after the ship appeared in Eneshan space and asked for permission to repair damage done to its hull and systems after a recent battle with a Rraey cruiser. The *Kite* had won the exchange but had to retreat before its damage could be totally repaired (the *Kite* had picked a fight at one of the Rraey's more moderately defended colonies, where the military strength was strong enough to repel a single Special Forces craft but not strong enough to blast it wholly out of the sky). A routine courtesy tour of the *Kite* for the Eneshan military was offered by its commander but declined as a matter of course by the Eneshan military, who had already confirmed the *Kite*'s story through its informal intelligence channels with the Rraey. The *Kite* also asked for and received

permission for members of its crew to have shore leave at Tresh, a resort that had been set aside for Colonial Union diplomats and staff stationed on Enesha. Tresh lay to the southeast of Dirluew, which was just north of the flight path the troop transport carrying two squads' worth of "vacationing" members of the 2nd Platoon had filed.

As the troop transport passed near Dirluew, it reported an atmospheric disturbance and changed course northward to avoid chop, edging briefly into the no-fly zone over the Dirluew airspace. Eneshan transport command noted the correction but required the transport to return to its previous flight plan as soon as it edged past the turbulence. The transport did, its load two squads lighter, a few minutes later.

It was interesting what you could do, when your enemy was officially your ally. And unaware you knew it was your enemy.

The particle beams seared forth from the tugs assigned to the *Kite* and struck the Hierarch's Palace. The first, the strongest of the beams by a significant margin, tore through six levels of palace, into the guts of the place, to vaporize the palace's backup generator and, twenty meters below that, the main power line. Severing the main power line switched the palace's electrical systems to the backup, which had been destroyed milliseconds earlier. In the absence of centralized backup power, various local backups sprang to life and locked down the palace through a system of security doors. The designers of the palace's electrical and security systems reasoned that if both the main power and the backup power were taken down, the entire palace itself would probably be under attack. This was correct as far as it went; what the designers did not expect or intend was for the decentralized system of local backups to play an integral part in the attacker's plans.

This beam caused relatively little secondary damage; its energies were tuned specifically to stay contained within its circumference and to bore deep into the Eneshan ground. The resulting hole was more than eighty yards deep before some of the debris thrown up from the beam's work (and some of the debris from the six levels of palace) filled the bottom of the hole to a depth of several meters.

The second beam pierced the palace's administrative wing. Unlike the first beam, this beam was tuned wide and designed to throw off a massive amount of waste heat. The administrative wing of the palace

buckled and sweated where the beam struck. Superheated air tore through the offices, blasting wide doors and windows and igniting everything inside with a combustion point below 932 degrees centigrade. More than three dozen Eneshan night-shift government workers, military guards and janitors immolated, broiling instantly within their carapaces. The hierarch's private office and everything in it, directly in the focused center of the beam, turned to ash only fractions of a second before the firestorm the beam's heat and energy created blew those ashes to all corners of the rapidly deconstructing wing.

The second beam was by far the most destructive but the least critical of the three beams. The Special Forces certainly didn't intend or expect to assassinate the heirarch in her private office; she was rarely in it on any evening and would absolutely not have been in it on this night, when she was attending to public functions as part of the Chafalan celebrations. She was on the other side of Dirluew entirely. It would have been a clumsy attempt at best. But the Special Forces wanted it to *look* like a clumsy attempt on the heirarch's life, so the heirarch—and her immense and formidable personal security detail—would be kept far from the palace while the 2nd Platoon accomplished its actual goal.

The third beam had the lowest power of any of them and flickered as it surgically battered away at the roof of the palace, like a surgeon cauterizing and removing skin one layer at a time. The goal of this beam was not terror or wholesale destruction but to cut a direct pathway to a palace chamber, in which resided the 2nd Platoon's goal, and the lever that, it was hoped, would serve to pry the Eneshans out of their tripartite plan to attack humanity.

::We're going to kidnap what now?:: asked Daniel Harvey.

::We're going to kidnap Vyut Ser,:: Jane Sagan said. ::Heir to the Eneshan throne.::

Daniel Harvey gave a look of sheer incredulousness, and Jared was reminded why Special Forces soldiers, despite their integration, actually bothered to meet physically for briefings: In the end, nothing could really top body language.

Sagan forwarded the intelligence report on the mission and the mission specs, but Harvey piped up again before the information could unpack completely. ::Since when have we gotten into the kidnapping business?:: Harvey asked. ::That's a new wrinkle.::

::We've done abductions before,:: Sagan said. ::This is nothing new.::

::We've abducted *adults,*:: Harvey said. ::And generally speaking they've been people who mean us harm. This kidnapping actually involves a kid.::

::It's more like a grub,:: said Alex Roentgen, who by now had unpacked the mission briefing and had begun to go through it.

::Whatever,:: Harvey said. ::Grub, kid, child. The point is, we're going to use a young innocent as a bargaining chip. Am I right? And that's the first time we've done *that*. It's scummy.::

::This from the guy who usually has to be told not to blow shit up,:: Roentgen said.

Harvey glanced over to Roentgen. ::That's right,:: he said. ::I usually am the guy you have to tell not to blow shit up. And I'm telling you that this mission stinks. What the fuck is wrong with the rest of you?::

::Our enemies don't have the same high standards as you, Harvey,:: Julie Einstein said, and forwarded a picture of the pile of children's corpses at Gettysburg. Jared shivered again.

::Does that mean we have to have the same low standards as they do?:: Harvey said.

::Look,:: Sagan said. ::This isn't up to a vote. Our intelligence people tell me the Rraey, the Eneshans and the Obin are getting close to a big push into our space. We've been harassing the Rraey and the Obin on the margins but we haven't been able to move against the Eneshans because we're still working under the polite fiction that they're our allies. This has given them the time to prepare, and despite all the disinformation we've been feeding them they still know too much about where our weak points are. We've got solid intelligence that says the Eneshans are right up front on any plan of attack. If we move against the Eneshans openly, all three of them will be at our necks, and we don't have the resources to fight them all. Harvey's right: This mission takes us into new territory. But none of our alternative plans

have the same impact this one does. We can't break the Eneshans militarily. But we can break them psychologically.::

By this time Jared had absorbed the entire report. ::We're not stopping with kidnapping,:: he said to Sagan.

::No,:: Sagan said. ::Kidnapping alone won't be enough to make the hierarch agree to our terms.::

::Christ,:: Harvey said. He'd finally absorbed the entire briefing. ::This shit stinks.::

::It beats the alternative,:: Sagan said. ::Unless you really think the Colonial Union can take on three enemies at once.::

::Can I just ask one question?:: said Harvey. ::Why do we get stuck with this crap?::

::We're Special Forces,:: Sagan said. ::This is the sort of thing we do.::

::Bullshit,:: Harvey said. ::You said it yourself. We *don't* do this. *Nobody* does this. We're being made to do this because no one else wants to do this.::

Harvey looked around in the briefing room. ::Come on, we can admit this, to ourselves at least,:: he said. ::Some realborn asshole in military intelligence thought up this plan and then a bunch of realborn generals signed off on it, and then the Colonial Defense Forces' realborn commanders didn't want to have anything to do with it. So *we* get it, and everyone thinks we won't mind because we're a bunch of two-year-old amoral killers. Well, I have morals, and I know everyone in this room does too. I won't back away from a stand-up fight. All of you know that about me. But this isn't a stand-up fight. This is bullshit. First-class bullshit.::

::All right, it's bullshit,:: Sagan said. ::But this is also our mission.::

::Don't ask me to be the one who snatches the thing,:: Harvey said. ::I'll have the back of whoever does it, but that's one cup I'll ask to have passed from me.::

::I won't ask you,:: Sagan said. ::I'll find something else for you to do.::

::Who are you going to get to do the deed?:: Alex Roentgen said.

::I'll do it myself,:: Sagan said. ::I'll want two volunteers to go with me.::

::I already said I'd have your back,:: Harvey said.

::I need someone who will make the snatch if I get a bullet in the head, Harvey,:: Sagan said.

::I'll do it,:: Sarah Pauling said. ::Harvey's right that this shit stinks, though::

::Thank you, Pauling,:: Harvey said.

::You're welcome,:: Pauling said. ::Don't get cocky.::

::That's one,:: Sagan said. ::Anyone else?::

Everyone in the briefing room turned to look at Jared.

::What?:: Jared said, suddenly defensive.

::Nothing,:: said Julie Einstein. ::It's just that you and Pauling are usually a matched pair.::

::That's not true at all,:: Jared said. ::We've been with the platoon for seven months now and I've had all your backs at one time or another.::

::Don't get worked up about it,:: Einstein said. ::No one said you were *married*. And you have had all our backs. But everyone tends to pair off on missions with one person more than others. I get paired with Roentgen. Sagan gets stuck with Harvey because no one else wants to deal with him. You pair up with Pauling. That's all.::

::Stop teasing Jared,:: Pauling said, smiling. ::He's a nice guy, unlike the rest of you degenerates.::

::We're *nice* degenerates,:: Roentgen said.

::Or nicely degenerate, anyway,:: said Einstein.

::If we're all done with our fun,:: Sagan said, ::I still need another volunteer.::

::Dirac,:: Harvey prompted.

::Stop already,:: Sagan said.

::No,:: Jared said. ::I'll do it.::

Sagan seemed about to object, but stopped herself. ::Fine,:: she said, and then continued on with her briefing.

::She did it again,:: Jared sent to Pauling, on a private channel, as the briefing continued. ::You saw it, didn't you? How she was about to say "no."::

::I saw it,:: Pauling said. ::But she didn't. And when it comes down to it she's always treated you just like she treats anyone.::

::I know,:: Jared said. ::I just wish I knew why she doesn't seem to like me.::

::She doesn't really seem to like anyone all *that* much,:: Pauling said. ::Stop being paranoid. Anyway, I like you. Except when you're paranoid.::

::I'll work on that,:: Jared said.

::Do,:: Pauling said. ::And thank you for volunteering.::

::Well, you know,:: Jared said. ::Give the crowd what they want.::

Pauling giggled audibly. Sagan shot her a look. ::Sorry,:: Pauling said, on a common channel.

After a few minutes Jared hailed Pauling on a private channel. ::Do you really think this mission is a bad one?::

::It fucking stinks,:: Pauling said.

The beams ceased, and Jared and the rest of the 2nd popped their parafoils. Charged nanobots extended in tendrils from backpacks and formed individual gliders. Jared, no longer free-falling, tilted himself toward the palace and the smoking hole left by the third beam—a hole that led to the heir's nursery.

At roughly the size of St. Peter's Basilica, the Hierarch's Palace was no small edifice, and outside the main hall where the hierarch held formal court and the now-shattered administrative wing, no non-Eneshans were allowed to enter. There were no architectural plans of the palace in the public record, and the palace itself, constructed in the fluid and chaotically natural Eneshan architectural style that resembled nothing so much as a series of termite mounds, did not lend itself to easy discovery of significant areas or rooms. Before the plan to kidnap the Eneshan heir could be put into action, it had to be discovered where the heir's private chambers lay. Military Research considered it a pretty puzzle, but one without a lot of time to be solved.

Their solution was to think small; indeed, to think single-celled—to think of *C. xavierii,* a Eneshan prokaryotic organism evolutionarily parallel to bacteria. Just as strains of bacteria live in happily symbiotic relationships with humans, so did *C. xavierii* with Eneshans, primarily

internally but also externally. Like many humans, not all Eneshans were fastidious about their bathroom habits.

Colonial Union Military Research cracked *C. xavierii* open and resequenced it to create the subspecies *C. xavierii movere,* which coded to construct mitochondrion-sized radio transmitters and receivers. These tiny organic machines recorded the movements of their hosts by polling their positions relative to *C. xavierii movere* housed by other Eneshans within their transmitting range. The recording capacity of these microscopic devices was small—they had the capacity to store less than an hour's worth of movement—but each cellular division created a new recording machine, tracking movement anew.

Military Research introduced the genetically-modified bug into the Hierarch's Palace by way of a hand lotion, provided to an unsuspecting Colonial Union diplomat who had regular physical contact with her Eneshan counterparts. These Eneshans then transmitted the germ to other members of the palace staff simply through everyday contact. The diplomat's personal brain prostheses (and those of her entire staff) were also surreptitiously modified to record the tiny transmissions that would soon emanate from the palace staff and all its inhabitants, including the hierarch and her heir. In less than a month Military Research had a complete map of the internal structure of the Hierarch's Palace, based on the movement of its staff.

Military Research never told the Colonial Union diplomatic staff of its unintentional espionage. Not only was it safer for the diplomats, but they would have been appalled at how they had been used.

Jared reached the roof of the palace and dissolved his glider, landing away from the hole in case it collapsed. Other members of the 2nd were landing or had landed and were preparing for their descent by securing rappelling lines. Jared spotted Sarah Pauling, who had walked up the hole and was now peering down through the smoke and debris cloud.

::Don't look down,:: Jared said to her.

::Too late for that,:: she replied, and sent him a vertiginous image from her point of view. Through their integration Jared could sense her anxiety and anticipation; he felt that way himself.

The rappelling lines were secure. ::Pauling, Dirac,:: said Jane Sagan. ::Time to move.:: It had been less than five minutes since the beams had

torn down from the sky, and each additional second brought the increased chance that their quarry had been moved. They were also working against the eventual arrival of troops and emergency responders. Blowing up the executive wing would distract and delay attention to the 2nd Platoon, but not for long.

The three clipped in and dropped down four levels, straight into the heirarch's residential apartments. The nursery was directly beyond; they had decided not to send the beam down directly on top of the nursery to avoid an accidental collapse. As Jared dropped he sensed the wisdom of that decision; "surgical" or not, the beam had made a mess of the three floors above the heirarch's apartments, and much of the damage had fallen straight down.

::Activate your infrared,:: Sagan said, as they rappelled. ::The lights are down and there's a lot of dust down there.:: Jared and Pauling did as they were told. A glow suffused the air, heated by the exertions of the beam and the smoldering remains below.

Residential guards assigned to the heirarch's apartments flowed into the chamber as the three rappelled down, battering through doors to get at the invaders. Jared, Sagan and Pauling unclipped and dropped heavily into the debris pile below them, hastened by Enesha's heavier gravity. Jared could feel the debris attempting to impale him as he struck it; his unitard stiffened to avoid that. The three swept the room visually and with infrared to locate the guards, and sent the information upward. A few seconds later there were several sharp cracks from the roof. The residential guards dropped.

::You're clear,:: said Alex Roentgen. ::The wing is sealed off and we're not seeing any more guards. More of us are coming down.:: As he said this Julie Einstein and two other members of the 2nd began their descent on the lines.

The nursery adjoined the heirarch's private chamber, and for security purposes the rooms were a single sealable unit, impenetrable to most violent attempts at entry (save massively powerful particle beams shot down from space). Because the two rooms were assumed to be externally secure, the internal security between the rooms was light. A gorgeously carved but single-bolted door was the nursery's only

security from the heirarch's chamber. Jared shot the lock and entered the room as Pauling and Sagan covered him.

Something hurtled toward Jared as he checked his corners; he ducked and rolled, and looked up to find an Eneshan attempting to bring an improvised club crashing down on his head. Jared blocked the hit with his arm and kicked upward, connecting with the Eneshan between its forward lower limbs. The Eneshan roared as the kick cracked its carapace. In his peripheral vision Jared registered a second Eneshan in the room, huddled in the corner and holding something that was screaming.

The first Eneshan lunged again, bellowing, and then stopped bellowing but kept lunging, collapsing in a pile on top of Jared. After the Eneshan lay on top of him Jared realized that somewhere in there he'd heard a burst of gunfire. He looked around the body of the Eneshan and saw Sarah Pauling behind it, reaching over to grab the Eneshan's mantle, to pull the corpse off Jared.

::You could have tried killing it when it wasn't moving toward me,:: Jared said.

::Complain again and I'll leave you underneath the damn thing,:: Pauling said. ::Also, if you wouldn't mind pushing, we'll get it off you quicker.:: Pauling pulled and Jared pushed, and the Eneshan rolled to the side. Jared crawled out and got a good look at his attacker.

::Is it him?:: Pauling asked.

::I can't tell,:: Jared said. ::They kind of all look alike.::

::Move,:: Pauling said, and came in close to get a look at the Eneshan. She accessed her mission briefing. ::It's him,:: she said. ::It's the father. It's the heirarch's consort.::

Jared nodded. Jahn Hio, the heirarch's consort, chosen for political reasons to sire the heir. The matriarchal traditions of the Eneshan royalty dictated that the father of the heir was directly responsible for the heir's pre-metamorphic care. Tradition also dictated the father would stay awake at the side of the heir after her consecration ceremony for three Eneshan days, to symbolize the acceptance of his paternal duties. This—among other reasons related to the consecration ceremony—was why the kidnapping was planned when it was. Jahn Hio's assassination was a secondary but critical part of the mission.

::He died for protecting his child,:: Jared said.

::It's *how* he died,:: Pauling said. ::It's not *why* he died.::

::I don't think the distinction matters much to him,:: Jared said.

::This mission stinks,:: Pauling agreed.

A burp of gunfire erupted from the corner of the room. The screaming that had been constant in the room since their entrance stopped briefly and then started up again even more urgently. Sagan came out of the corner, Empee in one hand, a wriggling white mass secured in the other against the crook of her arm. The second Eneshan slumped where Sagan shot it.

::The nanny,:: Sagan said. ::She wouldn't give me the heir.::

::You asked?:: Pauling said.

::I did,:: Sagan said, pointing to the small translation speaker she had clipped on to her belt. It would have use later in the mission. ::I tried, anyway.::

::Our killing the consort probably didn't help,:: Jared said.

The screaming thing in Sagan's arm twisted mightily and nearly got out of her grip. Sagan dropped her Empee to get a better grip on it. It screamed ever louder as she squeezed it securely between her arm and body. Jared peered intently to look at it.

::So that's the heir,:: Jared said.

::This is it,:: Sagan said. ::She, actually. Pre-metamorphic Eneshan. Like a big, screaming maggot.::

::Can we sedate her?:: Pauling asked. ::She's pretty loud.::

::No,:: Sagan said. ::We need the heirarch to see that she's still alive.:: The heir wriggled again; Sagan began to stroke it with her free hand in an attempt to soothe it. ::Get my Empee for me, Dirac,:: she said. Jared bent down to retrieve the rifle.

The lights went on.

::Oh, shit,:: Sagan said. ::Power's back.::

::I thought we blasted the backup generator,:: Jared said.

::We did,:: Sagan said. ::Looks like there was more than one. Time to go.:: The three backed out of the nursery, Sagan with the heir, Jared with his Empee and Sagan's up and ready.

In the main apartment, two members of the platoon were shimmying up the ropes. Julie Einstein had positioned herself to cover

the two doors into the apartment.

::They're going to cover the two levels above us,:: Einstein said. ::The hole goes through rooms on those levels with only one entrance to them. At least that's what the floor plan says. Top level is wide open, though.::

::Transport on its way,:: Alex Roentgen said. ::We've been spotted up here and we're starting to take fire.::

::We need people to cover us coming up,:: Sagan said. ::And to lay down suppressing fire on the first level. It's open; that's where they're going to come through.::

::On it,:: Roentgen said.

Sagan handed the heir to Pauling, unslung her equipment pack and pulled out a shoulder sling with a pouch sized to accommodate the heir. She stuffed the squalling heir into the pouch with some difficulty, secured it and placed the sling across her body with the strap over her right shoulder.

::I'm center line,:: Sagan said. ::Dirac, you're left; Pauling, right. Einstein will cover us as we climb, and then you two cover her and the other two from the top as they get out. Clear?::

::Clear,:: Jared and Pauling said.

::Reload my Empee and give it to Einstein,:: Sagan said to Jared. ::She won't have time to reload.:: Jared cleared the magazine from Sagan's Empee, reloaded it with one of his spares, and handed it to Einstein. She took it and nodded.

::We're ready for you,:: Roentgen said from above. ::You better hurry.::

As they went to their lines they heard the sound of heavy Eneshan footfalls. Einstein began firing as they started to climb. At each of the next two levels Jared's platoon mates were calmly waiting, sighted in on their sole entrances. Jared's integration told him they were both scared shitless and waiting for the shoe to drop.

From above Jared new firing began. The Eneshans had come through on the top level.

Sagan was weighed down by the heir but lacking her Empee or her equipment pack; on balance she was traveling light, and flew up her line, ahead of Jared and Pauling. The pair of bullets that stitched across

her shoulder hit her as she was within reach of the top, and grasping for the hand of Julian Lowell to pull her up. A third bullet slipped past Sagan's shoulder and struck Lowell directly above his right eye, passing through his brain before ricocheting off the inside of his skull and burying itself in his neck, severing his carotid in the process. Lowell's head snapped back and then forward, his body slumping and falling forward into the hole. He collided with Sagan as he fell, tearing the final scrap of fabric that kept intact the sling holding the heir. Sagan felt the tear and the sling falling away but was too occupied trying to keep herself from falling to do anything about it.

::Catch it,:: she said, and was grabbed by Alex Roentgen and pulled to safety.

Jared grabbed and missed; it was too far away. The sling rippled past Pauling, who snatched it as it fell and then swung as it described an arc around her.

From below, Jared sensed a surprised shock of pain from Julie Einstein. Her Empee went silent. The rustling sound that followed was the sound of Eneshans climbing into the heirarch's chambers.

Pauling looked up at Jared. ::Climb,:: she said.

Jared climbed without looking down. As he passed the upper level of the palace he glimpsed the bodies of a score of dead Eneshans, and more live Eneshans behind them firing at Jared as he climbed, while Jared's platoon mates fired back with bullets and grenades. Then he was beyond them, pulled up by an unseen platoon mate onto the roof of the palace. He turned back to see Sarah Pauling on her line, sling in hand, Eneshans below her aiming upward at her. Holding the sling, she could not climb.

Pauling looked at Jared, and smiled. ::Beloved,:: she said, and flung the sling to him as the first of the bullets struck her body. Jared reached as she danced on her line, moved by the force of the projectiles that overwhelmed the defenses of her unitard and tore into her legs, torso, back and skull. He caught the sling as she fell, and pulled it from the hole as she found its bottom. He felt the last second of her life and then it was gone.

He was screaming as they pulled him into the transport.

The Eneshan culture is both matriarchal and tribal, as befits a race whose far distant ancestors were hive-dwelling, insect-like creatures. The hierarch comes to power through the vote of the matriarchs of the major Eneshan tribes; this makes the process sound rather more civilized than it is, since the vote-gathering process can involve years of unspeakably violent civil war, as the tribes battle to make their own matriarch ascendant. To avoid massive unrest at the end of every hierarch's reign, once a hierarch is chosen the position becomes hereditary, and aggressively so: A hierarch must produce *and* consecrate a viable heir within two Eneshan years of assuming the mantle—thus assuring an orderly transfer of power for the future—or have the hierarchical rule of her tribe end with her reign.

Eneshan matriarchs, fed hormonally-dense royal jellies that produce sweeping changes in their bodies (another artifact of their ancestry), are fertile lifelong. The ability to produce an heir was rarely an issue. What would become an issue was from which tribe to choose the father. Matriarchs do not marry for love (strictly speaking, Eneshans don't marry at all), so political considerations would now come into play. The tribes unable to achieve hierarchy now competed (on a much subtler and usually less violent level) to produce a consort, with the reward being social advantages for the tribe directly, and the ability to influence hierarchical policies as part of the "dowry" provided the consortial tribe. Hierarchs from newly-ascendent tribes traditionally took their consort either from their tribe's greatest ally, as a reward for service, or from the tribe of their greatest enemy, if the hierarchical "vote" had been particularly messy and there was a perception that the entire Eneshan nation needed to be cobbled back together. Hierarchs from established lines, on the other hand, had far greater leeway in choosing their consorts.

Fhileb Ser was the sixth hierarch in the current Ser line (the tribe had held the hierarchy three times previous over the last several hundred Eneshan years). Upon ascending she chose her consort from the Hio tribe, a tribe whose expansionist colonial ambitions eventually led to the decision to ally in secret with the Rraey and the Obin, in order to attack human space. For its primary role in the war, Enesha would come away with some of the Colonial Union's prime real estate,

including the Colonial Union home planet of Phoenix. The Rraey would come away with somewhat fewer planets but would get Coral, the planet that was the site of their recent humiliation by the Colonial Union.

The Obin, cryptic to the last, offered to contribute forces only slightly less expansive than the Eneshans but asked only for a single planet: the overpopulated and resource-stripped Earth, which was in such apparent poor repair that the Colonial Union had it under quarantine. Both the Eneshans and the Rraey were happy to cede the planet.

Hierarchical policy, prompted by the Hio, inclined the Enesha to plan a war with the humans. But although united by hierarchical rule, each Eneshan tribe kept its own counsel. At least one tribe, the Geln, strongly opposed attacking the Colonial Union, since humans were reasonably strong, distressingly tenacious and not especially principled when they felt threatened. The Geln felt that the Rraey would have been a far better target, given that race's long-standing enmity with the Eneshans and its weak military state after being crushed by the humans at Coral.

Hierarch Fhileb Ser chose to ignore the Gelns' counsel in this matter, but, noting the tribe's apparent fondness for humanity, selected one of the Gelns' tribal counselors, Hu Geln, as Enesha's ambassador to the Colonial Union. Hu Geln, recently recalled to Enesha to witness the Consecration of the Heir and to celebrate Chafalan with the hierarch. Hu Geln, who was with the hierarch when the 2nd Platoon attacked, and who was with her now, in hiding, as she was hailed by the humans who had murdered her consort and stolen her heir.

::They've stopped firing at us,:: Alex Roentgen said. ::Looks like they've figured out we have the heir.::

::Good,:: Sagan said. Pauling and Einstein were dead but she had other soldiers stuck in the palace and she wanted to get them out. She signaled them to make their way to the transport. She winced as Daniel Harvey tended to her shoulder; her unitard blocked the first hit completely but the second managed to get through and did some real

damage. For now, her right arm was entirely useless. She motioned with her left hand to the small gurney in the middle of the transport, where the wriggling form of Vyut Ser, heir to the hierarch, lay securely strapped in. The heir no longer screamed but mewled, her fear tempered by exhaustion.

::Someone needs to give her the shot,:: Sagan said.

::I'll do it,:: Jared said, stood before anyone else could volunteer, and retrieved the long needle stored in a medical kit below Sagan's transport seat. He turned and stood over Vyut Ser, hating the thing. An overlay popped into his vision, via his BrainPal, showing him where to insert the needle and how far to push into the heir's guts to deliver what was inside the syringe.

Jared jabbed the needle savagely into Vyut Ser, who screamed horribly at the invasion of the cold metal. Jared pressed the button on the syringe that shot half the contents into one of the heir's two immature reproductive sacs. Jared extracted the needle and plunged it into Vyut Ser's second reproductive sac, emptying the syringe. Inside the sacs nanobots coated the interior walls and then burned, searing the tissues dead, rendering their owner irreversibly sterile.

Vyut Ser wailed in confusion and pain.

::I've got the hierarch on the line,:: Roentgen said. ::Audio and video.::

::Pipe her into the general feed,:: Sagan said. ::And Alex, stand by the gurney. You get to be the camera.::

Roentgen nodded and stood in front the gurney, fixing on Sagan and allowing the audio and visual feeds to his BrainPal from his ears and eyes to serve as microphone and camera.

::Piping in now,:: Roentgen said. In Jared's field of vision—and in the field of vision of everyone in the transport—the Hierarch of Enesha appeared. Even without knowing the map of Eneshan expressions, it was clear the hierarch was incandescent with rage.

"You fucking piece of human shit," the hierarch said (or the translation said, eschewing a literal translation for something that expressed the intent behind the words). "You have thirty seconds to give me my daughter or I will declare war on every last one of your worlds. I swear to you I will reduce them to rubble."

"Shut up," Sagan said, the translation coming from her belt speaker.

From the other end of the line came multiple loud clacks, indicating absolute shock from the hierarch's court. It was simply inconceivable someone would speak to her that way.

"I beg your pardon," the hierarch said, eventually, shocked herself.

"I said, 'shut up,'" Sagan said. "If you are smart you will listen to what I have to say to you and spare both our peoples needless suffering. Hierarch, you won't declare war on the Colonial Union here because you've already declared war on us. You, the Rraey and the Obin."

"I don't have the slightest—" the heirarch began.

"Lie to me again and I'll cut off your daughter's head," Sagan said.

More clacks. The hierarch shut up.

"Now," Sagan said. "Are you at war with the Colonial Union?"

"Yes," the hierarch said, after a long moment. "Or will be, presently."

"I think not," Sagan said.

"Who *are* you?" the hierarch said. "Where is Ambassador Hartling? Why I am negotiating with someone who is threatening to kill my child?"

"I imagine Ambassador Hartling is in her office right now, trying to figure out what's going on," Sagan said. "As you did not feel the need to enlighten her concerning your military plans, neither did we. You are negotiating with the person who has threatened to kill your child because you have threatened to kill *our* children, Hierarch. And you are negotiating with me because at the moment I am the negotiator you deserve. And you can be assured on this matter you will not be able to negotiate with the Colonial Union again."

The hierarch fell silent again. "Show me my daughter," she said, when she spoke again.

Sagan nodded to Roentgen, who turned and showed Vyut Ser, who had once again downshifted into whimpering. Jared saw the reaction of the hierarch, who was reduced from the leader of a world to merely a mother, feeling the pain and fear of her own child.

"What are your demands?" the hierarch said, simply.

"Call off your war," Sagan said.

"There are two other parties," the hierarch said. "If we back out they will want to know why."

"Then continue preparing for war," Sagan said. "And then attack one of your allies instead. I would suggest the Rraey. They are weak, and you could take them by surprise."

"And what of the Obin?" the hierarch said.

"We'll deal with the Obin," Sagan said.

"Will you, now," the hierarch said, clearly skeptical.

"Yes," Sagan said.

"Are you suggesting we can simply hide what happened here tonight?" the hierarch said. "The beams you used to destroy my palace could be seen for a hundred miles."

"Don't hide it, investigate it," Sagan said. "The Colonial Union will gladly help our Eneshan friends in their investigation. And when it's discovered the Rraey are behind it, you'll have your rationale for war."

"Your other demands," the hierarch said.

"There is a human, named Charles Boutin," Sagan said. "We know he's helping you. We want him."

"We don't have him," the hierarch said. "The Obin do. You can ask them for him, for all I care. Your other demands."

"We want assurances that you will call off your war," Sagan said.

"You want a treaty?" the hierarch asked.

"No," Sagan said. "We want a new consort. One of our choosing."

This generated the loudest clack of all from the court.

"You *murder* my consort, and then you *demand* to pick the next one?" the hierarch said.

"Yes," Sagan said.

"To what end?" the hierarch implored. "My Vyut has been consecrated! She is the legal heir. If I meet your demands and you let my daughter go, she is still of the Hio clan and by our traditions they will still have political influence. You would have to kill my daughter to break their influence"—the hierarch paused brokenly, then continued —"and if you do that, why would I fulfill any of your demands?"

"Hierarch," Sagan said, "your daughter is sterile."

Silence.

"You didn't," the hierarch said, pleading.

"We did," Sagan said.

The hierarch rubbed her mouthpieces together, creating an unworldly keening noise. She was crying. She got up from her seat, out of frame, keening, and then suddenly reappeared, too close to the camera. "You are monsters!" the hierarch screamed. Sagan said nothing.

The Consecration of the Heir cannot be undone. A sterile heir means the death of a hierarchical line. The death of a hierarchical line means years of unyielding and bloody civil war as tribes compete to found a new line. If the tribes knew an heir was sterile, they would not wait for the natural span of the heir's life to begin their internecine warfare. First the sitting hierarch would be assassinated, to bring the sterile heir to power. Then she would be a constant assassination target as well. When power is within reach, few will wait patiently for it.

By making Vyut Ser sterile, the Colonial Union had sentenced the Ser hierarchical line to oblivion and the Enesha to anarchy. Unless the hierarch gave in to their demands and consented to something unspeakable. And the hierarch knew it.

She fought it anyway. "I will not allow you to choose my consort," the hierarch said.

"We will inform the matriarchs your daughter is sterile," Sagan said.

"I will destroy your transport where it sits, and my daughter with you," the hierarch screamed.

"Do it," Sagan said. "And all the matriarchs will know that your incompetence as hierarch led us to attack you and caused the death of your consort and your heir. And then you may find that while you may *choose* a tribe to provide you with a consort, the tribe itself may not agree to provide one. No consort, no heir. No heir, no peace. We know Eneshan history, Hierarch. We know the tribes have withheld consorts for less, and that those boycotted hierarchs didn't last long after that."

"It won't happen," the hierarch said.

Sagan shrugged. "Kill us, then," she said. "Or refuse our demands, and we'll give you back your sterile daughter. Or do it our way and have our cooperation in extending your hierarchical line and keeping your nation from civil war. These are your choices. And your time is almost up."

Jared watched emotions play the hierarch's face and body, strange because of their alien nature but no less powerful for that. It was a quiet and heartrending struggle. Jared was reminded that at the briefing for the mission Sagan said that humans couldn't break the Eneshans militarily; they had to break them psychologically. Jared watched as the hierarch bent and bent and bent and then broke.

"Tell me who I am to seize upon," the hierarch said.

"Hu Geln," Sagan said.

The hierarch turned to look at Hu Glen, standing quietly in the background, and gave the Eneshan equivalent of a bitter laugh. "I am not surprised," she said.

"He is a good man," Sagan said. "And he will counsel you well."

"Try to console me again, human," the hierarch said, "and I will send us all into war."

"My apologies, Hierarch," Sagan said. "Do we have agreement?"

"Yes," the hierarch said, and began her keening again. "Oh, God," she cried. "Oh, Vyut. Oh, God."

"You know what you have to do," Sagan said.

"I can't. I can't," the hierarch cried. At the sound of the cries, Vyut Ser, who had been silent, stirred and cried for her mother. The hierarch broke anew.

"You have to," Sagan said.

"Please," the most powerful creature on the planet begged. "I can't. Please. Please, human. Please help me."

::Dirac,:: Sagan said. ::Do it.::

Jared unsheathed his combat knife and approached the thing that Sarah Pauling had died for. She was strapped to a gurney and she wriggled and cried for her mother, and she would die alone and frightened, and far away from anyone that ever loved her.

Jared broke too. He did not know why.

Jane Sagan walked over to Jared and took his knife and raised it. Jared turned away.

The crying stopped.

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PART II

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EIGHT

It was the black jellybeans that did it.

Jared saw them as he was browsing at a Phoenix Station commissary candy stand, and passed them over, more interested in the chocolates. But his eye kept going back to them, a small container segregated out from the rest of the jellybeans, which were in a mixed assortment.

"Why do you do that?" Jared asked the vendor, after his eyes tracked back to the black jellybeans for the fifth time. "What makes the black jellybeans so special?"

"People either love 'em or hate 'em," the vendor said. "The people who hate 'em—that's most people—don't like having to pick them out of the rest of the jellybeans. The people who love 'em like to have their own little bag of 'em. So I keep some on hand but in their own space."

"Which sort are you?" Jared asked.

"I can't stand them," the vendor said. "But my husband can't get enough. And he'll breathe on me while he's eating them, just to annoy me. I kicked him right off the bed, once, for doing that. You've never had a black jellybean?"

"No," Jared said. His mouth was watering slightly. "But I think I'll try some."

"Brave man," the vendor said, and filled a small clear plastic bag with the candies to hand to Jared. Jared took it and fished out two jellybeans while the vendor rang up the order; being in the CDF, Jared didn't pay for the jellybeans (they, like everything else, were gratis on what CDF soldiers lovingly referred to as their all-inclusive package

tour of hell), but vendors kept track of what they sold to soldiers and billed the CDF accordingly. Capitalism had made it to space and was doing reasonably well.

Jared took the pair of jellybeans and popped them into his mouth, crushed them with his molars and then held them there as his saliva suffused the licorice flavor over his tongue, vapors of its scent moving beyond his palate and expanding in his sinus cavity. His eyes closed, and he realized that they were just as he remembered. He took a handful and crammed them into his mouth.

"How are they?" the vendor said, watching the enthusiastic consumption.

"They're good," Jared said, between jellybeans. "Really good."

"I'll tell my husband there's another on his team," the vendor said.

Jared nodded. "Two," he said. "My little girl loves them too."

"Even better," the vendor said, but by this time Jared had stepped away, lost in thought, heading back toward his office. Jared took ten steps, completely swallowed the mass of jellybeans in his mouth, reached to get more and stopped.

My little girl, he thought, and was hit with a thick knot of grief and memory that made him convulse, gag and vomit his jellybeans on the level walkway. As he coughed the last fragment of the candies from his throat, a name formed in his head.

Zoë, Jared thought. *My daughter. My daughter who is dead.*

A hand touched his shoulder. Jared recoiled, almost slipping on the vomit as he twisted away, bag of jellybeans flying from his hand. He looked at the woman who had touched him, a CDF soldier of some sort. She looked at him strangely and then there was a short, sharp buzz in his head like a human voice accelerated to ten times speed. It happened again and once more, like two slaps on the inside of his head.

"What?" Jared yelled at the woman.

"Dirac," she said. "Calm down. Tell me what's wrong."

Jared felt disoriented fear and quickly stepped away from the soldier, clipping other pedestrians as he heaved away.

Jane Sagan watched Dirac stumble away and then looked down at the dark splash of vomit and the splay of jellybeans on the floor. She looked back toward the candy stand and stalked over.

"You," she said, pointing to the vendor. "Tell me what happened."

"The guy came over and bought some black jellybeans," the vendor said. "Said he loved them and shoved a bunch into his mouth. Then he takes a couple of steps and throws up."

"That's it," Sagan said.

"That's it," the vendor said. "I made small talk about how my husband likes black jellybeans, he said his kid likes them too, he took the jellybeans and he walked off."

"He talked about his kid," Sagan said.

"Yeah," the vendor said. "He said he had a little girl."

Sagan looked down the walkway. There was no sign of Dirac. She starting running in the direction she last saw him going and tried to open a channel to General Szilard.

Jared reached a station lift as others were exiting, jabbed the button for his lab's level and suddenly realized his arm was green. He retracted it with such violence that it smacked hard against the lift wall, bringing into sharp, painful focus that it was, in fact, his arm, and that he wasn't going to get away from it. The other people in the lift looked at him strangely, and in one case with actual venom; he'd almost hit a woman when he drew back his arm.

"Sorry," he said. The woman snorted and performed the forward-looking elevator stare. Jared did the same and saw a smeary reflection of his green self in the brushed metal walls of the lift. Jared's confused anxiety by this point was peaking toward terror, but one thing he did know was that he didn't want to lose his shit in an elevator filled with strangers. Social conditioning was, for the moment, stronger than panic over confused identity.

If Jared were to have taken a moment to question who he was, standing there silently in the lift and waiting for his level, he would have come to the startled realization that he wasn't exactly sure. But he hadn't; on a day-to-day basis people don't question their identity. Jared knew that being green wasn't right, his lab was three levels down from where he was, and that his daughter Zoë was dead.

The lift reached Jared's level; he stepped out to a wide hallway. This level of Phoenix Station had no candy stands or commissaries; it was one of the two levels of the station given over primarily to military research. CDF soldiers stood every hundred feet or so, monitoring hallways that led deeper into the level. Each hallway was fronted by biometric and BrainPal/brain prosthesis scanners that scanned every individual who approached. If that person was not allowed down the hallway, the CDF guard would intercept them before they made it to the hallway itself.

Jared knew that he was supposed to have access to most of these hallways, but doubted that this strange body would have clearance for any of them. He set down the hall, walking as if he had a purpose, toward the hallway he knew held his lab and his office. Maybe by the time he got there he'd figure out what to do next. He was almost there when he saw every CDF guard in front of him in the hallway turn and look at him.

Crap, Jared thought. His hallway was less than fifty feet away. On impulse he sprinted toward it and was surprised at how fast his body took off toward his goal. So was the soldier guarding it; he whipped up his Empee but by the time it was up Jared was on him. Jared shoved the soldier, hard. The soldier bounced off the hallway wall and fell. Jared sprinted past him without breaking his stride and ran to his lab door, two hundred feet down the corridor. As Jared ran, sirens blared and emergency doors slammed shut; Jared barely passed the threshold of the one that would have separated him from his goal when it shot out from the corridor sides, sealing the section in less than half a second.

Jared reached the door to his lab and thrust it open. Inside were a CDF military research technician and a Rraey. Jared was struck immobile by the cognitive dissonance of having a Rraey in his lab, and through the confusion came a knife-like frisson of fear, not of the Rraey, but from having been caught doing something dangerous and terrible and punishable. Jared's brain surged, looking for a memory or explanation to attach to the fear, but arrived at nothing.

The Rraey wiggled its head and came around the desk at which it had been standing, and moved toward Jared.

"You're him, aren't you?" the Rraey said, in strangely pronounced but recognizable English.

"Who?" Jared asked.

"The soldier they made to trap a traitor," the Rraey said. "But they couldn't do it."

"I don't understand you," Jared said. "This is my lab. Who are you?"

The Rraey wiggled its head again. "Or maybe they did, after all," the Rraey said. It pointed to itself. "Cainen. Scientist and prisoner. Now you know who I am. Do you know who *you* are?"

Jared opened his mouth to answer and realized he did not know who he was. He stood there dumb and openmouthed until the emergency doors flew open a few seconds later. The woman soldier he had talked to earlier stepped through, raised a pistol, and shot him in the head.

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::First question,:: General Szilard said. Jared lay in the Phoenix Station infirmary, recovering from his stun bolt, with two CDF guards stationed at the foot of his bed and Jane Sagan standing by the wall. ::Who are you?::

::I'm Private Jared Dirac,:: Jared said. He did not ask who Szilard was; his BrainPal ID'd him as he entered the room. Szilard's own BrainPal could have as easily ID'd Jared, so the question wasn't a matter of mere identification. ::I'm stationed on the *Kite*. My commanding officer is Lieutenant Sagan, who is over there.::

::Second question,:: General Szilard said. ::Do you know who Charles Boutin is?::

::No, sir,:: Jared said. ::Should I?::

::Possibly,:: Szilard said. ::It was his lab we found you standing in front of. It was his lab that you told that Rraey was yours. Which suggests that you thought you *were* Charles Boutin, at least for a minute. And Lieutenant Sagan tells me that you wouldn't respond to your name when she tried to talk to you.::

::I remember not knowing that I was me,:: Jared said. ::But I don't remember thinking I was anyone else.::

::But you got to Boutin's lab without ever having been there before,:: Szilard said. ::And we know you didn't access your BrainPal for a station map in order to find it.::

::I can't explain it,:: Jared said. ::The memory of it was just in my head.:: Jared saw Szilard glance over at Sagan at that.

The door opened and two men walked through. One of the men stalked over to Jared before his BrainPal could identify him.

"Do you know who I am?" he said.

Jared's punch sent the man to the floor. The guards raised their Empees; Jared, already coming down from his sudden surge of rage and adrenaline, immediately put his hands up.

The man stood up as Jared's BrainPal finally identified him as General Greg Mattson, head of Military Research.

"That answers *that,*" Mattson said, holding his hand to his right eye. He stalked off toward the room's lavatory, to check out the damage.

"Don't be so sure," Szilard said. He turned to Jared. "Private, do you know the man you just struck?"

"I know now he's General Mattson," Jared said. "But I didn't know that when I struck him."

"Why did you strike him?" Szilard asked.

"I don't know, sir," Jared said. "It just…" He stopped.

"Answer the question, Private," Szilard said.

"It just seemed like the right thing to do at the time," Jared said. "I can't explain why."

"He's definitely remembering some things," Szilard said, turning to Mattson. "But he's not remembering it all. And he doesn't remember who he was."

"Crap," Mattson said, from the lavatory. "He remembered enough to punch me in the head. That son of a bitch has been waiting to do that for years."

"He could be remembering it all and trying to convince you that he doesn't, General," the other man said to Szilard. Jared's BrainPal identified him as Colonel James Robbins.

"It's possible," Szilard said. "But his actions so far don't seem to suggest it. If he really were Boutin, it wouldn't be in his interest to let

us know he remembered anything at all. Punching out the general wouldn't have been very smart."

"Not smart," Mattson said, coming out of the lavatory. "Just cathartic." He turned to Jared and pointed to his eye, ringed in gray where the SmartBlood had been smashed out of blood vessels, causing a bruise. "Back on Earth, you'd have hung this shiner on me for a couple of weeks. I should have you shot just on principle."

"General," Szilard began.

"Relax, Szi," Mattson said. "I buy your theory. Boutin wouldn't be stupid enough to punch me, so this isn't Boutin. Bits of him are coming out, though, and I want to see how much we can get."

"The war Boutin tried to start is over, General," Jane Sagan said. "The Enesha are going to turn on the Rraey."

"Well, that's wonderful, Lieutenant," Mattson said. "But in this case two out of three won't do. The Obin may still be planning something, and since it looks like Boutin is with them, perhaps we shouldn't go declaring victory and calling off the search just yet. We still need to know what Boutin knows, and now that the private here has got two people rattling around in his skull, perhaps we can do a little more to encourage the other one to come out and play." He turned to Jared. "What do you say, Private? They call you guys the Ghost Brigades, but you're the only one with a *real* ghost in your head. Want to get it out?"

"With all due respect, sir, I have no idea what you're talking about," Jared said.

"Of course you don't," Mattson said. "Apparently, other than where his lab is, you don't know a goddamn thing about Charles Boutin at all."

"I know one other thing," Jared said. "I know he had a daughter."

General Mattson touched his hand gingerly to his black eye. "That he did, Private." Mattson dropped his hand and turned to Szilard. "I want you to give him back to me, Szi," he said, and then noticed Lieutenant Sagan shoot Szilard a glance; no doubt she was sending him one of those rat-a-tat mental messages Special Forces used instead of speech. "It's only temporary, Lieutenant," he said. "You can have him back when we're done. And I promise I won't break him. But we're not

going to get anything useful out of him if he gets shot dead on a mission."

"You didn't have a problem with him getting shot dead on a mission before," Sagan said. "Sir."

"Ah, the vaunted Special Forces snotty attitude," Mattson said. "I was wondering when it would become obvious you were six."

"I'm nine," Sagan said.

"And I'm one hundred and thirty, so listen to your great-great-grandfather," Mattson said. "I didn't care if he died before because I didn't think he was useful. Now he may be useful, so I'd rather he didn't die. If it turns out he's not useful, then you can have him back and he can die all over again for all I care. Regardless, you don't get a vote. Now shut up, Lieutenant, and let the grown-ups talk." Sagan stewed but shut up.

"What are you going to do with him?" Szilard asked.

"I'm going to put him under the microscope, of course," Mattson said. "Find out why he's leaking memories now and see what it takes to leak a few more." He jerked a thumb back to Robbins. "Officially, he'll be assigned to Robbins as an assistant. Unofficially, I expect he'll be spending a lot of time down at the lab. That Rraey scientist we took off your hands has been coming in useful down there. We'll see what he can do with him."

"You think you can trust a Rraey?" Szilard asked.

"Shit, Szi," Mattson said. "We don't let him turd without a camera up his ass. And he'll die in a day without his medicine. He is the only scientist I have that I absolutely know I *can* trust."

"All right," Szilard said. "You gave him to me once when I asked. You can have him now. Just remember he's one of ours, General. And you know how I am about my people."

"Fair enough," Mattson said.

"The transfer order is in your queue," Szilard said. "As soon as you approve it, it's done." Szilard nodded to Robbins and Sagan, glanced over to Jared, and left.

Mattson turned to Sagan. "If you've got any good-byes to make, now's the time to do them."

"Thank you, General," Sagan said. ::What an asshole,:: she said to Jared.

::I still don't know what's going on or who Charles Boutin is,:: Jared said. ::I tried accessing information on him but it's all classified.::

::You're going to find out soon enough,:: Sagan said. ::Whatever you learn, I want you to remember one thing. At the end of it all, you're Jared Dirac. No one else. No matter how you were made or why or what happens. I sometimes forgot that about you, and I'm sorry for it. But I want you to remember it.::

::I'll remember it,:: Jared said.

::Good,:: Sagan said. ::When you see this Rraey they're talking about, his name is Cainen. Tell him that Lieutenant Sagan asked him to look out for you. Tell him I would consider it a favor.::

::I've met him,:: Jared said. ::I'll tell him.::

::And I'm sorry for shooting you in the head with the stun bolt,:: Sagan said. ::You know how it is.::

::I do,:: Jared said. ::Thank you. Good-bye, Lieutenant.::

Sagan left.

Mattson pointed to the guards. "You two are dismissed." The guards left. "Now," Mattson said, turning to Jared. "I'm going to work under the assumption that your little seizure earlier today is not going to be a frequent occurrence, Private. Just the same, from now on your BrainPal is set to record and locate, so we have no surprises from you and we always know how to find you. Change the setting just once and every CDF soldier on Phoenix Station will get the go-ahead to shoot you dead. Until we know exactly who and what's in your head, you don't get any private thoughts. Do you understand me?"

"I understand you," Jared said.

"Excellent," Mattson said. "Then welcome to Military Research, son."

"Thank you, sir," Jared said. "And now, will someone please *finally* tell me what the hell is going on?"

Mattson smiled, and turned to Robbins. "You tell him," Mattson said, and left.

Jared turned his gaze to Robbins.

"Uh," Robbins said. "Hello."

• • •

"That's an interesting bruise you have there," Cainen said, pointing to the side of Jared's head. Cainen was speaking his own language; Jared's BrainPal provided the translation.

"Thanks," Jared said. "I was shot." Jared spoke his own language as well; after several months, Cainen's English proficiency was quite good.

"I remember," Cainen said. "I was there. As it happens, I was once stunned by your Lieutenant Sagan too. We should start a club, you and I." Cainen turned to Harry Wilson, who was standing nearby. "You can join too, Wilson."

"I'll pass," Wilson said. "I'm reminded of a wise man who once said that he would never want to join a club that would have him for a member. Also, I'd rather not get zapped."

"Coward," said Cainen.

Wilson bowed. "At your service."

"And now," Cainen said, bringing his attention back to Jared. "I trust you have some idea of why you're here."

Jared recalled the awkward and not especially forthcoming conversation with Colonel Robbins the day before. "Colonel Robbins told me that I had been born for the purpose of transferring this Charles Boutin's consciousness into my brain, but that it didn't take. He told me that Boutin had been a scientist here but that he'd turned traitor. And he told me that these new memories that I'm sensing are actually Boutin's old memories, and that no one knows why they are coming out now instead of earlier."

"How much detail did he give you about Boutin's life or research?" Wilson asked.

"None, really," Jared said. "He said if I learned too much from him or from their files, it might interfere with my memory coming back naturally. Will it?"

Wilson shrugged. Cainen said, "Since you're the first human to whom this has happened, there's no history to go on as to what we should do next. The closest thing to this are certain types of amnesia. Yesterday, you were able to find this lab and recall the name of Boutin's daughter, but you don't know how you knew it. That's similar to

source amnesia. What makes it entirely different is that the problem isn't your own memory, it's someone else's."

"So *you* don't know how to get any more memories out of me, either," Jared said.

"We have theories," Wilson said.

"Theories," Jared said.

"Hypotheses, more accurately," Cainen said. "I remember many months ago telling Lieutenant Sagan that the reason I thought Boutin's consciousness didn't take in you was that his was a mature consciousness, and when it was put into an immature brain that hadn't had enough experiences, it couldn't find a grip. But now you have those experiences, don't you? Seven months at war will season any mind. And perhaps something you experienced acted as a bridge to Boutin's memories."

Jared thought back. "My last mission," he said. "Someone very important to me died. And Boutin's daughter is dead as well." Jared didn't mention the assassination of Vyut Ser to Cainen, and his breakdown as he held the knife that would kill her, but it was in his mind as well.

Cainen nodded his head, showing his understanding of human language included nonverbal signals. "That could have been the moment, indeed."

"But why didn't the memories come back then?" Jared asked. "It happened when I was back on Phoenix Station, eating black jellybeans."

"*Remembrance of Things Past,*" Wilson said.

Jared looked at Wilson. "What?"

"Actually, *In Search of Lost Time* is a better translation of the original title," Wilson said. "It's a novel by Marcel Proust. The book begins with the main character experiencing a flood of memories from his childhood, brought on by eating some cake he dipped in his tea. Memories and senses are closely tied in humans. Eating those jellybeans could easily have triggered those memories, especially if the jellybeans were significant in some way."

"I remember saying that they were Zoë's favorites," Jared said. "Boutin's daughter. Her name was Zoë."

"That might have been enough," Cainen agreed.

"Maybe you should have some more jellybeans," Wilson joked.

"I did," Jared said, seriously. He had asked Colonel Robbins to get him a new bag; he was too embarrassed from his earlier vomiting to ask for one himself. Jared had sat in his new quarters, bag in hand, slowly eating black jellybeans for an hour.

"And?" Wilson asked. Jared just shook his head.

"Let me show you something, Private," Cainen said, and pressed a button on his keyboard. In the display area of his desk, three small light shows appeared. Cainen pointed to one. "This is a representation of Charles Boutin's consciousness, a copy of which, thanks to his technological industriousness, we have on file. This next one is a representation of your own consciousness, taken from during your training period." Jared looked surprised. "Yes, Private, they've been keeping tabs on you; you've been their science experiment since you were born. But this is just a representation. Unlike Boutin's consciousness, they don't have yours on file.

"This third image is your consciousness right now," Cainen said. "You're not trained to read these representations, but even to an uninformed eye it is clearly different than either of the other two representations. This is—we think—the first incident of your brain trying to meld what it's received of Boutin's consciousness with your own. Yesterday's incident changed you, probably permanently. Can you feel it?"

Jared thought about it. "I don't feel any different," he said, finally. "I have new memories, but I don't think I'm acting any differently than I usually do."

"Except for punching out generals," Wilson pointed out.

"It was an accident," Jared said.

"No, it wasn't," Cainen said, suddenly animated. "This is my point to you, Private. You were born to be one person. You became another. And now, you're becoming a third—a combination of the first two. If we continue on, if we're successful, more of who Boutin was will come through. You will change. Your personality could change, perhaps dramatically. Who you will *become* will be something different from

what you are *now*. I want to make sure you understand this, because I want you to make a choice about whether you want this to happen."

"A choice?" Jared asked.

"Yes, Private, a *choice,*" Cainen said. "Which is something you rarely make." He pointed to Wilson. "Lieutenant Wilson here chose this life: He signed up for the Colonial Defense Forces of his own accord. You, and all your Special Forces kind, were not given that choice. Do you realize, Private, that Special Forces soldiers are slaves? You have no say in whether you fight. You are not allowed to refuse. You're not even allowed to know that refusal is *possible*."

Jared was uncomfortable with this line of reasoning. "We don't see it that way. We're proud to serve."

"Of course you are," Cainen said. "That's how they've conditioned you since you were born, when your brain was turned on and your BrainPal thought for you and chose particular branches on the decision tree instead of others. By the time your brain was able to think on its own, the pathways that turn against choice were already laid down."

"I make choices all the time," Jared countered.

"Not big ones," Cainen said. "Through conditioning and a military life, choices were made for you all your short life, Private. Someone else chose to create you—no different than anyone else, that. But then they chose to imprint someone else's consciousness on your brain. They chose to make you a warrior. They chose the battles you would face. They chose to hand you over to us when it was convenient for them. And they would choose to have you become someone else by cracking your brain like an egg and letting Charles Boutin's consciousness run out all over yours. But *I* am choosing to have you choose."

"Why?" Jared asked.

"Because I can," Cainen said. "And because you should. And because apparently no one else will let you. This is *your* life, Private. If you choose to proceed, we'll suggest to you the ways we think will unlock more of Boutin's memories and personality."

"And if I don't?" Jared said. "What happens then?"

"Then we tell Military Research that we refuse to do anything to you," Wilson said.

"They could find someone else to do it," Jared said.

"They almost certainly *will,*" Cainen said. "But you'll have made your choice, and we'll have made ours too."

Jared realized that Cainen had a point: In his life, all of the major choices that affected him had been decided by others. His decision-making had been limited to inconsequential things or to military situations where not choosing something would have meant he was dead. He didn't consider himself a slave, but he was forced to admit that he'd never considered *not* being in Special Forces. Gabriel Brahe had told his training squad that after their ten-year term of service they could colonize, and no one ever questioned why they were made to serve the ten years at all. All the Special Forces training and development subsumed individual choice to the needs of the squad or platoon; even integration—the Special Forces' great military advantage—smeared the sense of self outside of the individual and toward the group.

(At the thought of integration, Jared felt an intense pang of loneliness. When his new orders came through, Jared's integration with the 2nd Platoon was switched off. The constant low-level hum of thought and emotion from his platoon mates was cavernous in its absence. If he had not been able to draw on his first isolated experiences of consciousness, he might have gone a little mad the moment he realized he could not sense his platoon anymore. As it was, Jared had spent most of the intervening day in a solid depression. It was an amputation, bloody and raw, and only the knowledge it was likely only temporary made it bearable.)

Jared realized with a growing sense of unease just how much of his life had been dictated, chosen, ordered and commanded. He realized how ill-prepared he was to make the choice Cainen had offered him. His immediate inclination was to say yes, that he wanted to go on: to learn more about Charles Boutin, the man he was supposed to be, and to become him, in some way. But he didn't know if it was something he really wanted, or merely something that was expected of him. Jared felt resentment, not at the Colonial Union or the Special Forces, but at Cainen—for putting him in a position to question himself and his choices, or lack thereof.

"What would you do?" Jared asked Cainen.

"I'm not you," Cainen said, and refused to speak any more about it. Wilson was likewise notably unhelpful. Both went about their work in the lab while Jared thought, staring into the three representations of consciousness that were all him, in one way or another.

"I've made a choice," Jared said, more than two hours later. "I want to go on."

"Can you tell me why?" Cainen said.

"Because I want to know more about all of this," Jared said. He motioned to the image of the third consciousness. "You tell me that I'm changing. I'm becoming someone else. I believe that. But I still *feel* like me. I think I'll still *be* me, no matter what happens. And *I* want to know."

Jared pointed to Cainen. "You say we Special Forces are slaves. You're right. I can't argue that. But we were also told that we are the only humans born with a purpose: To keep other humans safe. I wasn't given a choice for that purpose before, but I choose it now. I *choose* this."

"You choose to be a slave," Cainen said.

"No," Jared said. "I stopped being a slave when I made this choice."

"But you're choosing the path those who made you a slave would have you follow," Cainen said.

"It's my choice," Jared said. "If Boutin wants to harm us, I want to stop him."

"That means you might become like him," Wilson said.

"I was supposed to *be* him," Jared said. "Being *like* him still leaves room to be me."

"So this is your choice," Cainen said.

"It is," Jared said.

"Well, thank Christ," Wilson said, clearly relieved. Cainen also appeared to relax.

Jared looked at the two of them strangely. "I don't understand," he said to Cainen.

"We were ordered to bring out as much of Charles Boutin in you as possible," Cainen said. "If you had said no, and we refused to follow our orders, it probably would have been a death sentence for me. I'm a prisoner of war, Private. The only reason I'm allowed what little

freedom I have is because I've allowed myself to be useful. The moment I stop being useful is the moment the CDF withdraws the medicine that keeps me alive. Or they decide to kill me in some other way. Lieutenant Wilson here is not likely to be shot for disobeying the order, but from what I understand CDF prisons aren't very nice places to be."

"Insubordinates check in, but they don't check out," Wilson said.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Jared said.

"Because then it wouldn't have been a fair choice for you," Wilson said.

"We decided between us that we would offer you this choice and accept the consequences," Cainen said. "Once we made our own choice on the matter, we wanted to be sure you had the same freedom we did in making *your* choice."

"So thank you for choosing to go on," Wilson said. "I nearly crapped myself waiting for you to make up your damn mind."

"Sorry," Jared said.

"Think on it no more," Wilson said, "because now you have another choice to make."

"We've come up with two options we think will spark a larger cascade of memories from your Boutin consciousness," Cainen said. "The first is a variation of the consciousness transfer protocol used to put Boutin in your brain in the first place. We can cycle the protocol again and embed the consciousness a second time. Now that your brain is more mature, there's an excellent chance more of the consciousness would take—indeed, that it could *all* take. But there are some serious possible consequences."

"Like what?" Jared asked.

"Like that your consciousness would be entirely wiped out as the new one comes in," Wilson said.

"Ah," Jared said.

"You can see how it's problematic," Cainen said.

"I don't think I want to do that one," Jared said.

"We didn't think so," Cainen said. "In which case, we have a rather less invasive plan B."

"Which is?" Jared said.

“A trip down memory lane,” Wilson said. “Jellybeans were only the beginning.”

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NINE

Colonel James Robbins looked up at Phoenix, hovering over him in the sky. *Here I am again,* he thought.

General Szilard noticed Robbins's discomfort. "You don't really like the general's mess, do you, Colonel?" he asked, and jammed more steak in his mouth.

"I hate it," Robbins said, before he quite knew what was coming out of his mouth. "Sir," he added, quickly.

"Can't say that I blame you," Szilard said, around the beef. "The whole thing of barring non-generals from eating here is six kinds of stupid. How's your water, by the way?"

Robbins glanced down at the sweating glass in front of him. "Delightfully refreshing, sir," he said.

Szilard motioned with his fork to encompass the entire general's mess. "This is our fault, you know," he said. "The Special Forces, I mean."

"How so?" asked Robbins.

"Special Forces generals would bring anyone in their command structure in here—not just officers, but their enlisted too. Because outside of combat situations, no one in Special Forces really gives a shit about rank. So you had all these Special Forces troops in here, eating the nice steaks and ogling Phoenix overhead. It got on the other generals' nerves—not just that there were enlisted in here, but that they were *Ghost Brigade* enlisted. This was in the early days, when the idea of soldiers less than a year old gave you realborn the creeps."

"It still does," Robbins said. "Sometimes."

"Yeah, I know," Szilard said. "But you people hide it better now. Anyway, after a while the realborn generals let it be known that this was their own playpen. And now all anyone else gets in here is one of those delightfully refreshing glasses of water you've got there, Colonel. So on behalf of the Special Forces, I apologize to you for the inconvenience."

"Thank you, General," Robbins said. "I'm not hungry anyway."

"Good for you," Szilard said, and ate some more of his steak. Colonel Robbins eyed the general's meal. In fact, he was hungry, but it wouldn't have been polite to note it. Robbins made a mental note for the next time he was summoned to a meeting in the general's mess: Eat something first.

Szilard swallowed his steak and turned his attention back to Robbins. "Colonel, have you heard of the Esto system? Don't look it up, just tell me if you know it."

"I'm not aware of it," Robbins said.

"How about Krana? Mauna Kea? Sheffield?"

"I know the Mauna Kea on Earth," Robbin said. "But I assume that's not the one you're talking about."

"It's not." Szilard motioned again with his fork, waving it to indicate some point past the eastern limb of Phoenix. "Mauna Kea system is that way, just short of Phoenix's Skip Drive horizon. New colony there."

"Hawaiians?" Robbins asked.

"Of course not," Szilard said. "It's mostly Tamils, from what my data tell me. They don't name the system, they just live there."

"What's so interesting about this system?" Robbins said.

"The fact that less than three days ago a Special Forces cruiser disappeared in it," Szilard said.

"It was attacked?" Robbins asked. "Destroyed?"

"No," Szilard said. "It *disappeared*. No contact once it arrived in the system."

"Did it hail the colony?" Robbins asked.

"It wouldn't have done that," Szilard said, in a flat tone that suggested to Robbins that he shouldn't pursue the details.

He didn't. "Maybe something happened to the ship when it reentered real space," he said instead.

"We skipped in a sensor done," Szilard said. "No ship. No black box. No debris along the projected flight path. Nothing. It's gone."

"That's weird," Robbins said.

"No," Szilard said. "What's weird is that it was the fourth Special Forces ship this has happened to this month."

Robbins stared at Szilard blankly. "You've lost four cruisers? How?"

"Well, if we knew *that,* Colonel, we'd be off stomping on someone's neck," Szilard said. "The fact that what I'm actually doing is eating this steak in front of you should be an indication we are as in the dark as anyone."

"But you *do* think someone is behind this," Robbins said. "And it's not just an issue with the ships or their Skip Drives."

"Of course we do," Szilard said. "Having one ship disappear is a random incident. Having four disappear in a month is a fucking trend. This is not a problem with the ships or the drives."

"Who do you think is behind it?" Robbins said.

Szilard set down his utensils, irritable. "Christ, Robbins," he said. "Do you think I'm talking to you because I don't have *friends*?"

Robbins smiled wryly, in spite of himself. "The Obin, then," he said.

"The Obin," Szilard said. "Yes. The ones who have Charles Boutin tucked away somewhere. All the systems our ships disappeared from either are close to Obin space or are planets the Obin contested for at one point or another. That's a slender thread, but it's what we have at the moment. What we don't have is the how or why, and that's where I was hoping you might be able to shed some light."

"You want to know where we are with Private Dirac," Robbins said.

"If you don't mind," Szilard said, and picked up his utensils again.

"It's slow going," Robbins admitted. "We think the memory breach happened because of stress and sensory input. We can't put the same sort of pressure on him that combat did, but we have been introducing him to parts of Boutin's life one piece at a time."

"His records?" Szilard asked.

"No," Robbins said. "At least not the reports and files on Boutin that were written or recorded by other people. Those aren't from Boutin himself, and we don't want to introduce an outside point of view. Cainen and Lieutenant Wilson are working with primary sources —Boutin's recordings and notes—and with Boutin's things."

"You mean things Boutin owned?" Szilard asked.

"Things he owned, things he liked—remember the jellybeans—or things from other people that he knew. We've also taken Dirac to the places where Boutin lived and grew up. He was originally from Phoenix, you know. It's just a quick trip down by shuttle."

"It's nice he gets field trips," Szilard said, only a little dismissively. "But you said it was slow going."

"More of Boutin is coming out," Robbins said. "But much of it seems to be in personality. I've read Private Dirac's psychological profile; up to now he's been something of a passive character. Things happened to him rather than him making them happen. And for the first week or so he was with us he was like that. But over the last three weeks he's been becoming more assertive and more directed. And that's more in line with who Boutin was, psychologically speaking."

"So he's becoming more like Boutin. Fine," Szilard said. "But is he remembering anything?"

"Well, that's just it," Robbins said. "There's very little memory coming back. What's coming back is mostly about his family life, not his work. We'll run him recordings of Boutin making voice notes of his projects and he'll listen to them blankly. Show him a picture of Boutin's little girl, and he gets twitchy for a minute, and then he'll tell you about what was going on in the picture. It's frustrating."

Szilard chewed for a moment, thinking. Robbins took advantage of the pause to enjoy his water. It wasn't quite as refreshing as he'd previously suggested.

"The memories of his little girl don't lead to any tangential memories coming up?" Szilard asked.

"Sometimes," Robbins said. "A picture of Boutin and his daughter at some research base he was stationed at reminded him of some of the work he'd been doing there. Some early research on consciousness

buffering, before he came back to Phoenix Station and started working on it using the technology we'd gotten from the Consu. But he didn't remember anything *useful,* in terms of why Boutin would decide to turn traitor."

"Show him another picture of Boutin's daughter," Szilard said.

"We showed him all we could find," Robbins said. "There aren't that many. And there aren't any of her physical things around—no toys or drawings or anything like that."

"Why not?" Szilard asked.

Robbins shrugged. "She died before Boutin came back to Phoenix Station," he said. "I guess he didn't want to bring her things with him."

"Now that's interesting," Szilard said. His eyes looked like they were focused on something at a distance, a sign he was reading something off his BrainPal.

"What?" Robbins said.

"I pulled Boutin's file while you were talking," Szilard said. "Boutin's a colonial, but his work for the Colonial Union required him to be stationed at Military Research facilities. The last place he worked before coming here was at Covell Research Station. Ever hear of it?"

"It sounds familiar," Robbins said. "But I can't place it."

"Says it was a zero-g-capable research facility," Szilard said. "They did some biomedical work, which is why Boutin was there, but it was mostly weapons and navigation systems. This is interesting: The station was actually positioned directly above a planetary ring system. It was just a klick above the ring plane. Used the ring debris to test their close-quarter navigation systems."

Now Robbins got it. Rocky planets with ring systems were rare, and ones with human colonies rarer still. Most colonists preferred not to live where stadium-sized chunks of falling rock plunging through the atmosphere were a common occurrence rather than a once-in-a-millennium sort of thing. One with a Military Research station orbiting overhead—that was pretty singular.

"Omagh," Robbins said.

"Omagh," Szilard agreed. "Which we no longer own. We could never prove that the Obin originally attacked the colony or the station. It's possible the Rraey attacked the colony, and then the Obin attacked

them when they were weakened from fighting us and before they could be reinforced. Which is one reason we never went to war with them over it. But we know they decided to claim the system for their own pretty damn quickly, before we could mount a force to take it back."

"And Boutin's daughter was on the colony," Robbins said.

"She was on the station, from what the casualty lists say," Szilard said, sending over the list for Robbins to view. "It was a large station. It would have had family quarters."

"Jesus," Robbins said.

"You know," Szilard said, casually, forking the last bite of steak into his mouth, "when Covell Station was attacked, it wasn't entirely destroyed. In fact, we have reliable data that suggest the station is largely intact."

"Okay," Robbins said.

"Including the family quarters."

"Oh, *okay,*" Robbins said, the light coming on. "I can already tell you I don't like where this is going."

"You said that Dirac's memory responds most strongly to stress and sensory input," Szilard said. "Taking him to the place where his daughter died—and where all her physical things are likely to be—would qualify as a significant sensory input."

"There is the minor problem that the system is now owned and patrolled by the Obin," Robbins said.

Szilard shrugged. "That's where the stress comes in," he said. He set his utensils into the "done" position on his plate and pushed it away from him.

"The reason General Mattson took over Private Dirac is because he didn't want him to die in combat," Robbins said. "Dropping him into Omagh space seems rather counter to that desire, General."

"Yes, well, the general's desire to keep Dirac out of harm's way has to be tempered by the fact that as of three days ago, four of my ships and more than a thousand of my people have up and disappeared, as if they never even existed," Szilard said. "And at the end of the day, Dirac is still Special Forces. I could force the issue."

"Mattson wouldn't like it," Robbins said.

"Neither would I," Szilard said. "I have a good relationship with the general, despite his patronizing attitude toward Special Forces and me."

"It's not just you," Robbins said. "He's patronizing to everyone."

"Yes, he's an equal opportunity asshole," Szilard said. "And he's aware of it, which he thinks means it's okay. Be that as it may, as much as I don't want to get on his bad side, I will if I have to. But I don't think I will have to."

A waiter came over to take Szilard's plate; Szilard ordered dessert. Robbins waited until the server left. "Why don't you think you'll have to?" he asked.

"What would you say if I told you we already had Special Forces at Omagh, making preparations to take back the system?" Szilard asked.

"I'd be skeptical," Robbins said. "That sort of activity would be noticed sooner or later, and the Obin are ruthless. They wouldn't tolerate their presence if they found out about it."

"You're right about that," Szilard said. "But you'd be wrong to be skeptical. Special Forces have been at Omagh for over a year now. They've even been inside Covell Station. I think we can get Private Dirac in and out without raising too much attention."

"How?" Robbins asked.

"Very carefully," Szilard said. "And by using a few new toys."

The waiter returned with the general's dessert: Two large Toll House cookies. Robbins stared at the plate. He loved Toll House cookies. "You realize that if you're wrong, and you can't sneak Dirac past the Obin, they'll kill him, your secret Omagh reclamation project will be exposed, and any information Dirac has about Boutin will die with him," Robbins said.

Szilard took a cookie. "Risk," he said. "It's always in the equation. If we do this and we botch it, then we are well and truly fucked. But if we don't do it, we risk Dirac never recovering Boutin's memories, and then we're vulnerable to what the Obin have planned next. And then we'll be well and truly fucked *then*. If we're going to be fucked, Colonel, I prefer to get fucked on my feet instead of on my knees."

"You have a way with mental imagery, General," Robbins said.

"Thank you, Colonel," Szilard said. "I try." He reached over, took the second cookie, and offered it to Robbins. "Here," he said. "I saw you coveting it."

Robbins stared at the cookie, then looked around. "I can't take that," he said.

"Sure you can," Szilard said.

"I'm not supposed to eat anything here," Robbins said.

"So what?" Szilard said. "Screw 'em. It's a ridiculous tradition and you know it. So break it. Take the cookie."

Robbins took the cookie and stared at it glumly.

"Oh, good God," Szilard said. "Do I have to order you to eat the damn thing?"

"It might help," Robbins said.

"Fine," Szilard said. "Colonel, I'm giving you a direct order. Eat the fucking cookie."

Robbins ate it. The waiter was scandalized.

"Behold," Harry Wilson said to Jared, as they walked into the cargo hold of the *Shikra*. "Your chariot."

The "chariot" in question consisted of a carbon fiber basket seat, two extremely small ion engines of limited power and maneuverability, one on each side of the basket seat, and an office-refrigerator–sized object positioned directly behind the seat.

"This is an ugly chariot," Jared said.

Wilson chuckled. Jared's sense of humor had improved over the last few weeks, or at the very least it had become more to Wilson's liking—it reminded him of the sarcastic Charles Boutin he knew. Wilson felt both pleasure and wariness about this: pleasure that his and Cainen's work was making a difference; wariness because Boutin was, after all, a traitor to humanity. Wilson liked Jared enough not to wish that fate on him.

"It's ugly but it's state-of-the-art," Wilson said. He walked over and slapped the refrigerator-looking object. "This is the smallest Skip Drive ever created," he said. "Hot off the assembly line. And not only is it

small, but it's an example of the first real advance we've had in Skip Drive technology in decades."

"Let me guess," Jared said. "It's based on that Consu technology we stole from the Rraey."

"You make it sound like a bad thing," Wilson said.

"Well, you know," Jared said, tapping his head. "I'm in this predicament *because* of Consu technology. Let's just say I'm not neutral on its uses."

"You make an excellent point," Wilson said. "But *this* is sweet. A friend of mine worked on this; we'd talk about it. Most Skip Drives require you to get out into flat time-space before you can engage them. You have to get far away from a planet. This one is less picky: it can use a Lagrange point. So long as you've got a planet with a reasonably large moon, you've got five nearby spots in space where it's gravitationally flat enough to engage this drive. If they can work out the kinks, it could revolutionize space travel."

"'Work out the kinks'?" Jared said. "I'm about to use this thing. Kinks are bad."

"The kink is that the drive is touchy about the mass of the object it's attached to," Wilson said. "Too much mass creates too much of a local warp on the time-space. Makes the Skip Drive do weird things."

"Like what?" Jared asked.

"Like explode," Wilson said.

"That's not encouraging," Jared said.

"Well, *explode* is not quite the accurate word," Wilson said. "The physics for what *really* goes on are much weirder, I assure you."

"You can stop now," Jared said.

"But *you* don't have to worry about it," Wilson continued. "It takes about five tons of mass before the drive gets wobbly. That's why this sled looks like a dune buggy. It falls well under the mass threshold, even with you in it. You should be fine."

"*Should* be," Jared said.

"Oh, stop being a baby," Wilson said.

"I'm not even one year old," Jared said. "I can be a baby if I want. Help me get into this thing, would you."

Jared negotiated his way into the sled's basket seat; Wilson strapped him in, and stowed his Empee in a storage box to the side of the seat. "Do a systems check," Wilson said. Jared activated his BrainPal and connected with the sled, checking the integrity of the Skip Drive and the ion engines; everything was nominal. The sled had no physical controls; Jared would control it with his BrainPal. "The sled's fine," Jared said.

"How's the unitard?" Wilson asked.

"It's fine." The sled had an open cockpit; Jared's unitard was formatted for hard vacuum, including a cowl that would slide down completely over his face, sealing him in. The nanobotic fabric of the unitard was photosensitive and passed visual and other electromagnetic information directly to Jared's BrainPal. As a result Jared would be able to "see" better with his eyes covered by the cowl than he could if he were using them. Around Jared's waist was a rebreather system that could, if necessary, provide breathable air for a week.

"Then you're good to go," Wilson said. "Your coordinates are programmed in for this side, and you should also have them to get back from the other side. Just put them in and sit back and let the sled do the rest. Szilard said that the Special Forces recovery team will be ready for you on the other side. You'll be on the lookout for a Captain Martin. He's got a confirmation key for you to verify his identity. Szilard says to follow his orders to the letter. Got it?"

"Got it," Jared said.

"Okay," Wilson said. "I'm out of here. We're going to start cycling out the air. Suit up. As soon as the bay doors open, activate the nav program and it will handle it from there."

"Got it," Jared repeated.

"Good luck, Jared," Wilson said. "Hope you find something useful." He walked out of the bay to the sound of the *Shikra*'s life-support system sucking the air out of the bay. Jared activated his cowl; there was momentary blackness followed by a rather impressive gain in Jared's peripheral awareness as the unitard's visual signal kicked in.

The rushing noise of air thinned into nothingness; Jared was sitting in vacuum. Through the metal of the ship and the carbon fibers of the sled, he could feel the bay doors sliding open. Jared activated the sled's

navigation program; the sled lifted from the floor of the bay and slid gently out the door. Jared's vision included the visual track of his flight plan, and its destination more than a thousand klicks away: the L4 position between Phoenix and its moon Benu, currently unoccupied by any other object. The ion engines kicked in; Jared felt his weight under the engines' acceleration.

The Skip Drive activated as the sled intersected the L4 position. Jared noted the sudden and impressively disconcerting appearance of a broad system of rings less than a klick above his point of view, girding the limb of a blue, Earth-like planet to his left. Jared's sled, which had been previously moving forward at an impressive rate of speed, was motionless. The ion engines had stopped firing just before the Skip translation and the inertial energy of the sled did not carry forward after it. Jared was glad about this. He doubted the tiny ion engines would have been able to stop the sled before it would have wandered into the ring system and squashed him into a tumbling rock.

::Private Dirac,:: Jared heard, as a verification key pinged his BrainPal.

::Yes,:: he said.

::This is Captain Martin,:: Jared heard. ::Welcome to Omagh. Please be patient; we're coming to get you.::

::If you send me directions, I could come to you,:: Jared said.

::We'd rather you didn't,:: Martin said. ::The Obin have been scanning the area more than usual recently. We'd prefer not to give them anything to see. Just sit tight.::

A minute or so later, Jared noticed three of the rings' rocks moving slowly his way. ::It looks like I've got some debris headed toward me,:: he sent to Martin. ::I'm going to maneuver out of the way.::

::Don't do that,:: Martin said.

::Why not?:: Jared asked.

::Because we hate chasing after shit,:: Martin said.

Jared directed his unitard to focus on the incoming rocks and magnify. Jared noticed the rocks had limbs, and that one of them was dragging what looked like a tow cable. Jared watched as they approached and finally arrived at the sled. One of them maneuvered itself in front of Jared while the other two attached the two cables. The

rock was human-sized and irregularly hemispherical; up close it looked like a turtle shell without an opening for a head. Four limbs of equal length sprouted in quadrilateral symmetry. The limbs had two joints of articulation and terminated in splayed hands with opposable thumbs on either side of the palm. The underside of the rock was flat and mottled, with a line that went down the center, suggesting the underside could open. Across the topside of the rock were flat, glossy patches that Jared suspected were photosensitive.

::Not what you were expecting, Private?:: said the rock, using Martin's voice.

::No, sir,:: Jared said. He accessed his internal database of the few intelligent species that were friendly to (or at least not openly antagonistic toward) humans but was coming up with nothing that was even remotely like this creature. ::I was expecting someone human.::

Jared felt a sharp ping of amusement. ::We *are* human, Private,:: Martin said. ::As much as you are.::

::You don't look human,:: Jared said, and immediately regretted it.

::Of course we don't,:: Martin said. ::But we don't live in typical human environments, either. We've been adapted for where we live.::

::Where do you live?:: Jared asked.

One of Martin's limbs motioned around him. ::Here,:: he said. ::Adapted for life in space. Vacuum-proof bodies. Photosynthetic stripes for energy.:: Martin tapped his underside. ::And in here, an organ that houses modified algae to provide oxygen and the organic compounds we need. We can live out here for weeks at a time, spying on and sabotaging the Obin, and they don't even know we're here. They keep looking for CDF spaceships. It confuses the hell out of them.::

::I'll bet,:: Jared said.

::Okay, Stross tells me we're good to go,:: Martin said. ::We're ready to reel you in. Hang on.:: Jared felt a jolt and then felt a small vibration as the tow cable was reeled in, dragging the sled into the ring. The rocks kept pace, manipulating small jet packs with their hind limbs.

::Were you born this way?:: Jared asked.

::*I* wasn't,:: Martin said. ::They created this body type three years ago. Everything new. They needed volunteers to test it. It was too

extreme to drop a consciousness into without testing. We needed to see if people could adapt to it without going insane. This body is almost entirely a closed system. I get oxygen, nutrients and moisture from my algae organ, and my waste gets dumped back into it to feed the algae. You don't eat and drink like people are supposed to. You don't even pee normally. And not doing things you're hardwired to do will make you nuts. You wouldn't think that not peeing could prey on your mind. But trust me, it does. It was one of the things they had to find a way around when they went into full production.::

Martin pointed toward the other two rocks. ::Stross and Pohl, now, *they* were born in these bodies,:: Martin said. ::And they're perfectly at home in them. I tell them about eating a hamburger or taking a dump, they look at me like I'm insane. And trying to describe regular sex to them is just a complete loss.::

::They have sex?:: Jared asked, surprised.

::You don't want to screw with the sex drive, Private,:: Martin said. ::That's bad for the species. Yes, *we* have sex all the time.:: He motioned to his underside. ::We open up here. The edges of our cowl can seal with someone else's. The number of positions we can perform are a bit more limited than the ones you can. Your body is more flexible than ours. On the other hand, we can fuck in total vacuum. Which is a neat trick.::

::I'd say so,:: Jared said. He felt the captain was veering into "too much information" territory.

::But we are a different breed, no doubt about it,:: Martin said. ::We even have a different naming scheme than the rest of Special Forces. We're named after old science fiction writers, instead of scientists. I even took a new name, when I switched over.::

::Are you going to switch back?:: Jared asked. ::To a normal body?::

::No,:: Martin said. ::When I first switched over, I would have. But you get used to it. This is my normal now. And this is the future. The CDF made us to give them an advantage in combat, just like they made the original Special Forces. And it works. We're dark matter. We can sneak up on a ship and the enemy thinks we're debris, right until the pocket nuke we stuck on their hull as we scraped by goes off. And then they don't think about anything anymore.

::But we're more than that,:: Martin continued. ::We're the first people *organically* adapted to living in space. Every body system is organic, even the BrainPal—we've got the first totally organic BrainPals. That's one improvement that's going to be passed down to the general Special Forces population the next time they do a new body edition. Everything we are is expressed in our DNA. If they can find a way to let us breed naturally, we'll have a new species: *Homo astrum,* who can live between the planets. We won't have to fight anyone for real estate then. And that means humans win.::

::Unless you don't want to look like a turtle,:: Jared said.

Martin sent a sharp ping of amusement. ::Fair enough,:: he said. ::There is that. And we know it. We call ourselves the Gamerans, you know.::

Jared fuzzed a moment until the reference came into his head, from back in the evenings at Camp Carson, watching science fiction films at ten times speed. ::Like the Japanese monster?::

::You got it,:: Martin said.

::Do you shoot fire too?:: Jared asked.

::Ask the Obin,:: Martin said.

The sled entered the ring.

Jared saw the dead man almost as soon as they slipped through the hole in the side of Covell Station.

The Gamerans had informed Special Forces that Covell Station was largely intact, but "largely intact" clearly meant something different to troops who thrive in hard vacuum. Covell Station was airless and lifeless and gravityless, although some electrical systems remarkably still had power, thanks to solar panels and hardy engineering. The Gamerans knew the station well; they had been in it before, retrieving files, documents, and objects that had not already been destroyed or looted by the Obin. The one thing they didn't retrieve was the dead; the Obin still came to the station from time to time and might notice if the number of the dead dramatically reduced over time. So the dead remained, floating cold and desiccated through the station.

The dead man was wedged up against a corridor bulkhead. Jared suspected he hadn't been there when the hole in the hull they slipped through was made: The explosive decompression would have sucked him right out into space. Jared turned to confirm this with Martin.

::He's new,:: Martin confirmed. ::To this section, anyway. The dead drift a lot around here, along with everything else. Is that someone you're looking for?::

Jared drifted toward the dead man. The man's body was parched and dried, all the moisture long since boiled away. He would have been unrecognizable even if Boutin had known him. Jared looked at the man's lab coat; the name tag claimed him to be Uptal Chatterjee. His papery skin was green. The name was right for a colonist, but he'd clearly been a citizen of a Western nation at one point.

::I don't know who he is,:: Jared said.

::Come on, then,:: Martin said. He grabbed the railing with both left hands and propelled himself down the corridor. Jared followed, letting go of the railing on occasion to get past a dead body bumping through the corridor. He wondered if he might find Zoë Boutin floating in the corridors or other part of the station.

No, a thought said. *They never found her body. They found hardly any colonist bodies.*

::Stop,:: Jared said to Martin.

::What is it?:: Martin said.

::I'm remembering,:: Jared said, and closed his eyes, even though they were behind his cowl. When he opened them, he felt sharper and more focused. He also knew exactly where he wanted to go.

::Follow me,:: Jared said.

Jared and Martin had entered the station in the weapons wing of the station. Coreward lay navigation and biomedical research; in the center was a large zero-g lab. Jared led Martin coreward and then clockwise through the corridors, pausing occasionally to let Martin pry open deactivated emergency doors with a jack-like piston. Corridor lights, fed by the solar panels, glowed feebly but more than enough for Jared's enhanced vision.

::Here,:: Jared said, eventually. ::This is where I did my work. This is my laboratory.::

The laboratory was filled with detritus and bullet holes. Whoever had come through was not interested in preserving the technical work of the lab; they had just wanted everyone dead. Blackened, dried blood was visible on tabletops and down the side of a desk. At least one person had been shot here, but there was no body.

Jerome Kos, Jared thought. *That was the name of my assistant. He was originally from Guatemala but immigrated to the United States when he was a kid. He was the one to solve the buffer overflow—*

::Crap,:: Jared said. The memory of Jerry Kos floated in his head, looking for context. Jared scanned the room, looking for computers or memory storage devices; there was nothing. ::Did your people take the computers from here?:: he asked Martin.

::Not from this room,:: Martin said. ::Some of the labs were missing computers and other equipment before we ever got a chance to swing through. The Obin or whoever must have taken them.::

Jared pushed himself over to a desk he knew was Boutin's. Whatever had been on the top of the desk had long since floated away. Jared opened the desk drawers to find office supplies, hanger folders and other, not particularly useful things. As Jared was closing the drawer with the hanger folders, he saw the papers in one of them. He stopped and pulled one out; it was a drawing, signed by Zoë Boutin with more enthusiasm than precision.

She drew me one a week, in Wednesday art period, Jared remembered. *I would take the new one and hang it with a pushpin, and take the old one and file it. I never threw any away*. Jared glanced up at the corkboard above the desk; there were pushpins in it, but no picture. The last one was almost certainly floating somewhere in the room. Jared had to fight off the urge to look for it until he found it. Instead he pushed off from the desk toward the door, slipping out into the corridor before Martin could ask him where he was going. Martin raced to keep up.

The work corridors of Covell Station were clinical and sterile; the family quarters worked hard to be the opposite. Carpeting—albeit of the industrial sort—covered the floors. Children in art classes had been encouraged to paint the corridor walls, which featured suns and cats and hills with flowers in pictures that were not art unless you were a

parent and could be nothing but if you were. The debris in the corridor and occasional dark smear against the wall worked against the cheer.

As a research head with a child, Boutin received larger quarters than most, which still meant it was almost unbearably compact; space is at a premium in space stations. Boutin's apartment lay at the end of C corridor (*C* for cat—the walls were painted with anatomically divergent cats of all sorts), apartment 10. Jared pulled himself down the corridor toward apartment 10. The door was closed but unlocked. Jared slid the door open and let himself in.

As everywhere, objects floated silently in the room. Jared recognized some things but not others. A book that was a gift from a college friend. Some picture in a frame. A pen. A rug he and Cheryl bought on their honeymoon.

Cheryl. His wife, dead from a fall while hiking. She died just before he left for this posting. Her funeral was on the second-to-last day before he came here. He remembered holding Zoë's hand at the funeral, listening to Zoë ask why her mother had to leave and making him promise he would never leave her. He promised, of course.

Boutin's bedroom was compact; Zoë's, one room over, would have been uncomfortable for anyone who wasn't five. The tiny child's bed was shoved along one corner, so securely wedged there that it hadn't floated away; even the mattress stayed stuck. Picture books, toys and stuffed animals hovered. One caught Jared's eye, and he reached for it.

Babar the Elephant. Phoenix had been colonized before the Colonial Union stopped accepting colonists from wealthy countries; there was a large French population, from which Boutin was descended. Babar was a popular children's character on Phoenix, along with Asterix, Tintin and the Silly Man, reminders of childhoods on a planet so distant from Phoenix that no one thought much about it. Zoë had never seen an elephant in real life—very few of them ever made it into space—but she had nonetheless been delighted with the Babar when Cheryl gave it to her on her fourth birthday. After Cheryl died Zoë made Babar a totem; she refused to go anywhere without it.

He remembered Zoë crying for it while he was dropping her off at Helene Greene's apartment, as he prepared to travel to Phoenix for several weeks of late-stage testing work. He was already late for the

shuttle; he had no time to get it. He finally settled her down by promising to find her a Celeste for her Babar. Placated, she gave him a kiss and went into Kay Greene's room to play with her friend. He then promptly forgot about Babar and Celeste until the day he was scheduled to return to Omagh and Covell. He was thinking of some reasonable excuse to explain why he was coming home empty-handed when he was pulled aside and told that Omagh and Covell had been attacked, and that everyone on the base and on the colony was dead, and that his daughter, best beloved, died alone and frightened, and far away from anyone that ever loved her.

Jared held Babar while the barrier between his consciousness and Boutin's memories crumbled, feeling Boutin's grief and anger as if it were his own. *This* was it. This was the event that set him on the path to treason, the death of his daughter, his Zoë Jolie, his joy. Jared, helpless to guard against it, felt what Boutin felt: the sick horror of unwillingly picturing his child's death, the hollow, horrible ache standing in that place in his life where his daughter had been, and mad, acidic desire to do something more than mourn.

The torrent of memory wracked Jared, and he gasped as each new *thing* hit his consciousness and dug in. They tumbled in too fast to be complete or to be completely understood, the broad strokes of memory defining the shape of Boutin's path. Jared had no memory of his first contact with the Obin; only a sense of release, as if making the decision freed him from a lingering sense of pain and rage—but he saw himself making a deal with the Obin for a safe haven in exchange for his knowledge of the BrainPal and consciousness research.

The details of Boutin's scientific work eluded him; the training they required to comprehend required pathways of understanding Jared simply didn't have. What he had were the memories of sensual experience: the pleasure in planning to fake his death and make his escape, the pain of separation from Zoë, the desire to leave the human sphere and start his work and create his revenge.

Here and there in this cauldron of sensation and emotion, concrete memories winked like jewels—data repeated across the memory field; things to be remembered from more than one incident. Even then some things still flickered in memory, but just out of reach—knowing Zoë

was the key to Boutin's defection but not knowing exactly why the key turned, and feeling the answer sway from his grasp as he reached for it, tantalizing and torturous.

Jared turned away to focus on the nuggets of memory that were hard, solid and within reach. Jared's consciousness circled one of these, a place name, roughly translated from a language spoken by creatures that didn't speak like humans.

And Jared knew where Boutin was.

The front door to the apartment slid open and Martin clambered through. He spotted Jared in Zoë's room and pushed over to him. ::Time to go, Dirac,:: he said. ::Varley tells me Obin are on their way. They must have bugged the place. Stupid of me.::

::Give me a minute,:: Jared said.

::We don't have a minute,:: Martin said.

::All right,:: Jared said. He pushed out of the room, taking Babar with him.

::Now's not the best time for souvenirs,:: Martin said.

::Shut up,:: Jared said. ::Let's go.:: He pushed out of Boutin's apartment without looking back to see if Martin was keeping up.

Uptal Chatterjee was where Jared and Martin had left him. The Obin scout craft hovering outside the hull breach was new.

::There are other ways out of this place,:: Jared said, as he and Martin huddled by Chatterjee's body. The scout was visible at an angle, but it apparently hadn't spotted them yet.

::Sure there are other ways,:: Martin said. ::The question is can we get to any of them before more of these guys show up. We can take one of them if we have to. More, there's going to be a problem.::

::Where is your squad?:: Jared asked.

::They're on their way,:: Martin said. ::We try to keep our movements outside the rings to a bare minimum.::

::A fine idea any other time but this,:: Jared said.

::I don't recognize that ship,:: Martin said. ::It looks like a new type of scout. I can't even tell if it has weapons. If it doesn't, between the two of us we might be able to take it out with our Empees.::

Jared considered this. He grabbed Chatterjee and gently pushed him in the direction of the hull breach. Chatterjee slowly floated across

the breach.

::So far, so good,:: Martin said, when Chatterjee's body was halfway across the breach.

Chatterjee's body shattered as the projectiles from the scout craft blasted through his frozen body. Limbs twirled violently and then were shattered themselves as another volley coursed through the breach. Jared could feel the impact of the projectiles on the far wall of the corridor.

Jared felt a peculiar sensation, like his brain being picked. The scout's position shifted slightly. *::Duck,::* Jared tried to say to Martin, but the communication didn't make it through. Jared dug in his heel, grabbed Martin and yanked him down as a fresh volley ripped through the corridor, shredding the hull breach wider and passing dangerously close to Jared and Martin.

Bright orange blazed outside and from his position Jared could see the scout tilt wildly. From below the scout, a missile arced its way up and impacted on the scout's underside, cracking the scout in two. Jared noted to himself that the Gamerans did indeed shoot fire.

::—was sure a lot of fun,:: Martin said. ::Now we'll get to spend a week or two in hiding while the Obin scour around looking for whoever blew up their ship. You've made our lives very interesting, Private. Now, time to go. The boys have shot up the tow rope. Let's get out of here before any more show up.:: Martin scrambled up and over and then launched himself out of the breach, toward the tow cable hovering five meters beyond it. Jared followed, grabbing the cable with one hand and holding on for dear life, while Babar stayed clenched in the other.

It was three days before the Obin stopped hunting for them.

"Welcome back," Wilson said, as he approached the sled, and then stopped. "Is that *Babar*?"

"It is," Jared said, sitting in the sled with Babar secured in his lap.

"I'm not sure I even want to know what *that's* about," Wilson said.

"You do," Jared said. "Trust me."

"It has something to do with Boutin?" Wilson said.

“It has everything to do with him,” Jared said. “I know why he turned traitor, Harry. I know everything.”

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TEN

One day before Jared returned to Phoenix Station, clutching Babar, the Special Forces cruiser *Osprey* skipped into the Nagano system to investigate a distress call sent by Skip courier from a mining operation on Kobe. The *Osprey* was not heard from again.

Jared was supposed to report in to Colonel Robbins. Instead he stomped past Robbins's office and into General Mattson's before Mattson's secretary could stop him. Mattson was inside and looked up as Jared walked in.

"Here," Jared said, thrusting Babar into the hands of a surprised Mattson. "Now I know why I punched you, you son of a bitch."

Mattson looked down on the stuffed animal. "Let me guess," he said. "This is Zoë Boutin's. And now you've got your memory back."

"Enough of it," Jared said. "Enough to know you're responsible for her death."

"Funny," Mattson said, putting Babar down on his desk. "Seems to me that either the Rraey or the Obin are responsible for her death."

"Don't be obtuse, General," Jared said. Mattson raised an eyebrow. "You ordered Boutin here for a month. He asked to bring his daughter with him. You refused. Boutin left his daughter and she died. He blames you."

"And you do too, apparently," Mattson said.

Jared ignored this. "Why didn't you let him bring her?" he asked.

"I'm not running a day care, Private," Mattson said. "I needed Boutin focused on his work. Boutin's wife was already dead. Who was going to take care of the girl? He had people at Covell who could do it for him; I told him to leave her there. I didn't *expect* that we'd lose the station and the colony and that the girl would die."

"This station houses other civilian scientists and workers," Jared said. "There are families here. He could have found or hired someone to watch Zoë while he worked. It wasn't an unreasonable request, and you know it. So, *really,* why didn't you let him bring her?"

By this time Robbins, alerted by Mattson's secretary, had entered the room. Mattson twisted uncomfortably. "Listen," Mattson said. "Boutin was a top-flight mind, but he was a goddamned flake. Especially after his wife died. Cheryl was a heat sink for the man's eccentricities; she kept him on an even keel. Once she was gone he became erratic, particularly where his daughter was involved."

Jared opened his mouth; Mattson held up a hand. "I'm not blaming him, Private," Mattson said. "His wife was dead, he had a little girl, he was worried about her. I was a parent too. I remember what it's like. But that topped with his own organizational issues created problems. He was behind on his projects as it was. It's one of the reasons I brought him back here for the testing phase. I wanted him to be able to get work done and not be distracted. And it worked; we finished testing ahead of schedule and things went so well that I gave the go-ahead to have him bumped up to the director level, which was something I wouldn't have done before the test phase. He was on his way back to Covell when it was attacked."

"He thought you turned down his request because you're a pissant tyrant," Jared said.

"Well, of course he did," Mattson said. "That's Boutin all over. Look, he and I never got along. Our personalities didn't mesh. He was high maintenance, and if it weren't for the fact he was a fucking genius, he wouldn't have been worth the trouble. He resented the fact that I or one of my people was always looking over his shoulder. He resented having to explain and justify his work. And he resented that I didn't give a shit if he resented it. I'm not surprised he thought it was just me being petty."

"And you're saying it *wasn't,*" Jared said.

"It wasn't," Mattson said, and then threw up his hands when Jared gave him a skeptical look. "Okay. Look. *Perhaps* our history of bad blood played a small role. Maybe I was less willing to cut him a break than I would be someone else. Fine. But my main concern was getting work out of him. And I *did* promote the son of a bitch."

"But he never forgave you for what happened to Zoë," Jared said.

"Do you think I wanted his little girl dead, Private?" Mattson said. "Do you think that I wasn't aware that if I had just said yes to his request, she'd be alive now? Christ. I don't *blame* Boutin for hating me after that. I didn't intend for Zoë Boutin to die, but I accept I bear a part of the responsibility for the fact she is dead. I said as much to Boutin himself. See if *that* is in your memories."

It was. Jared saw in his mind Mattson approaching him in his lab, awkwardly offering his condolences and sympathy. Jared recalled how appalled he felt at the fumbled words, and their implicit suggestion that Mattson should be absolved of the death of his child. He felt some of the cold rage wash over him now, and had to remind himself that the memories he was feeling were from another person, about a child who was not his own.

"He didn't accept your apology," Jared said.

"I'm aware of *that,* Private," Mattson said, and sat there for a moment before he spoke up again. "So, who *are* you now?" he asked. "It's clear you have Boutin's memories. Are you him now? In your gut, I mean."

"I'm still me," Jared said. "I'm still Jared Dirac. But I feel what Charles Boutin felt. I understand what he did."

Robbins spoke up. "You understand what he did," he repeated. "Does that mean you agree with it?"

"His treason?" Jared asked. Robbins nodded. "No. I can feel what he felt. I feel how angry he was. I feel how he missed his daughter. But I don't know how he got from there to turning on all of us."

"You can't feel it, or you don't remember it?" Robbins asked.

"Both," Jared said. More memory was returning after his epiphany at Covell, specific incidents and data from all parts of Boutin's life. Jared could sense that whatever happened there had changed him and

made him more fertile ground for Boutin's life. But the gaps were still there. Jared had to keep himself from worrying about them. "Maybe more will come the more I think about it," he said. "But right now I've got nothing on that."

"But you know where he is now," Mattson said, bringing Jared back from his reverie. "Boutin. You know where he is."

"I know where he was," Jared said. "Or at least I know where he was going when he left." The name was clear in Jared's brain; Boutin had focused on the name like a talisman, burning it indelibly into memory. "He went to Arist."

There was a brief moment while Mattson and Robbins accessed their BrainPals for information on Arist. "Well, crap," Mattson said, eventually.

The Obin home system housed four gas giants, one of which—Cha—orbited in a "Goldilocks zone" for carbon-based life and had three planet-sized moons among several dozen smaller satellites. The smallest of the large moons, Saruf, lay in orbit just outside the planet's Roche limit, and was wracked by immense tidal forces that turned it into an uninhabitable ball of lava. The second, Obinur, was half again the size of Earth but less massive due to a metal-poor composition. This was the Obin home world. The third, of Earth size and mass, was Arist.

Arist was thickly populated with native life-forms but largely uninhabited by the Obin, with only a few outposts of any size on the moon. Nevertheless, its close proximity to Obinur would make it almost impossible to assault. CDF ships wouldn't be able to simply sneak in; Arist was only a few light-seconds from Obinur. Almost as soon as they appeared the Obin would be moving in for the kill. Nothing short of a large assault force would stand a chance of extracting Boutin from Arist. Extracting Boutin would be declaring war, a war the Colonial Union wasn't ready to commit to even with the Obin standing alone.

"We're going to have to talk to General Szilard about this," Robbins said to Mattson.

"No shit," Mattson said. "If there was ever a job for Special Forces, this is it. Speaking of which"—Mattson focused on Jared—"once we drop this in Szilard's lap, you're going back to Special Forces. Dealing

with this is going to be his problem, and that means you're going to be his problem too."

"I'm going to miss you too, General," Jared said.

Mattson snorted. "You really are sounding more like Boutin every day. And that's not a good thing. Which reminds me, as my last official order to you, get down to see the bug and Lieutenant Wilson and let them get another look at your brain. I'm giving you back to General Szilard, but I promised I wouldn't break you. Being a little too much like Boutin might qualify as 'broken' by his standard. It does by mine."

"Yes, sir," Jared said.

"Good. You're dismissed." Mattson picked up Babar and tossed it to Jared. "And take this thing with you," he said.

Jared caught it and set it back down on Mattson's desk, facing the general. "Why don't you keep it, General," Jared said. "As a reminder." He left before Mattson could protest, nodding at Robbins as he left.

Mattson stared glumly at the stuffed elephant and then up at Robbins, who appeared about to say something. "Don't say a goddamned thing about the elephant, Colonel," Mattson said.

Robbins changed the topic. "Do you think Szilard will take him back?" he asked. "You said it yourself: He's sounding more like Boutin every day."

"You're telling *me* this," Mattson said, and waved in the direction of where Jared had gone. "You and the general were the ones who wanted to build this little bastard from spare parts, if you'll recall. And now you've got him. Or Szi's got him. Christ."

"So you're worried," Robbins said.

"I've never *stopped* being worried about him," Mattson said. "When he was with us I kept hoping he'd do something stupid so I would have a legitimate excuse to have him shot. I don't *like* that we've bred a second traitor, especially one with a military body and brain. If it were up to me I'd take Private Dirac and put him in a nice big room that features a toilet and a food slot, and keep him there until he rots."

"He's still technically under your command," Robbins said.

"Szi's made it clear he wants him back, for whatever damn fool reason he has," Mattson said. "He commands combat troops. If we go

to the mat on it, he'll get the decision." Mattson picked up Babar, examined him. "I just hope to holy fuck he knows what he's doing."

"Well," Robbins said. "Maybe Dirac won't actually be as much like Boutin as you think he will be."

Mattson snorted derisively, and wiggled Babar at Robbins. "See this? This isn't just some goddamned souvenir. It's a message straight from Charles Boutin himself. No, Colonel. Dirac is exactly as much like Boutin as I think he is."

• • •

"There's no question about it," Cainen said to Jared. "You've become Charles Boutin."

"The hell I have," Jared said.

"The hell you have," Cainen agreed, and motioned to the display. "Your consciousness pattern is now almost entirely identical to what Boutin left us. There's still some variation, of course, but it's trivial. For all intents and purposes, you have the same mind as Charles Boutin had."

"I don't feel any different," Jared said.

"Don't you?" Harry Wilson said, from the other side of the lab.

Jared opened his mouth to respond, then stopped. Wilson grinned. "You *do* feel different," he said. "I can tell it. So can Cainen. You're more aggressive than you were before. You're sharper with the retort. Jared Dirac was quieter, more subdued. More innocent, although that's probably not the absolute best way to put it. You're not quiet and subdued anymore. And certainly not innocent. I remember Charlie Boutin. You're a lot more like him than like who Jared Dirac used to be."

"But I don't feel like becoming a traitor," Jared said.

"Of course you don't," Cainen said. "You share the same consciousness, and you even share some of the same memories. But you had your own experiences, and that has shaped how you look at things. It's as with identical twins. They share the same genetics, but they don't share the same lives. Charles Boutin is your mind twin. But your experiences are still your own."

"So you don't think I'll go bad," Jared said.

Cainen did a Rraey shrug. Jared looked over to Wilson, who did a human shrug. "You say you know Charlie's motivation for going bad was the death of his daughter," he said. "You have the memory of that daughter and her death in you now, but nothing you've done or that we've seen in your head suggests that you're going to crack because of it. We're going to suggest they let you back into active duty. Whether they take our recommendation or not is another thing entirely, since the lead scientist on the project is one who until about a year ago was plotting to overthrow humanity. But I don't think that's your problem."

"It certainly is my problem," Jared said. "Because I want to find Boutin. Not just help with the mission, and absolutely not to sit it out. I want to find him and I want to bring him back."

"Why?" Cainen asked.

"I want to understand him. I want to know what it takes to make someone do this. What makes them a traitor," Jared said.

"You would be surprised at how little it takes," Cainen said. "Something even as simple as kindness from an enemy." Cainen turned away; Jared suddenly remembered Cainen's status and his allegiance. "Lieutenant Wilson," Cainen said, still looking away. "Would you give me and Private Dirac a moment." Wilson arched his eyebrows but said nothing as he left the lab. Cainen turned back to Jared.

"I wanted to apologize to you, Private," Cainen said. "And to warn you."

Jared gave Cainen an uncertain smile. "You don't need to apologize to me for anything, Cainen," he said.

"I disagree," Cainen said. "It was my cowardice that brought you into being. If I had been strong enough to hold out against the torture your Lieutenant Sagan put me through, I would be dead, and you humans would not have known of the war against you or that Charles Boutin was still alive. If I had been stronger, there would have never been a reason for you to have been born, and to be saddled with a consciousness that has taken over your being, for better or for worse. But I was weak, and I wanted to live, even if living was as a prisoner and a traitor. As some of your colonists would say, that is my karma, which I have to grapple with on my own.

"But quite unintentionally I have sinned against you, Private," Cainen said. "As much as anyone, I am your father, because I am the cause of the terrible wrong they have committed against you. It's bad enough that humans bring soldiers to life with artificial minds—with those damned BrainPals of yours. But to have you born only to carry the consciousness of another is an abomination. A violation of your right to be your own person."

"It's not as bad as all that," Jared said.

"Oh, but it *is,*" Cainen said. "We Rraey are a spiritual and principled people. Our beliefs are at the core of how we respond to our world. One of our highest values is the sanctity of self—the belief that every person must be allowed to make their own choices. Well"—Cainen did a neck bobble—"every Rraey, in any event. Like most races, we're less concerned about the needs of other races, especially when they are opposed to our own.

"Nevertheless," Cainen continued. "Choice matters. Independence matters. When you first came to Wilson and me, we gave you the choice to continue. You remember?" Jared nodded. "I must confess to you that I did that not only for your sake but for my own. Since I was the one who caused you to be born without choices, it was my moral duty to give one to you. When you took it—when you made a choice, I felt some of my sin lift away. Not all of it. I still have my karma. But some. I thank you for that, Private."

"You're welcome," Jared said.

"Now my warning to you," Cainen said. "Lieutenant Sagan tortured me when we first met, and at the end of it I broke and told her almost everything she wanted to know about our plans to attack you humans. But I told her one lie. I told her I never met Charles Boutin."

"You've met him?" Jared asked.

"I have," Cainen said. "Once, when he came to talk to me and other Rraey scientists about the architecture of the BrainPal, and how we might adapt it for the Rraey. A fascinating human. Very intense. Charismatic in his way, even to the Rraey. He is passionate, and we as a people respond to passion. Very passionate. Very driven. And very angry."

Cainen leaned in close. "Private, I know you think that this is about Boutin's daughter, and to some extent, maybe it is. But there is something else motivating Boutin as well. His daughter's death may simply have been the discrete event that caused an idea to crystallize in Boutin's mind, and it's that idea that fuels him. It's what made him a traitor."

"What is it?" Jared asked. "What's the idea?"

"I don't know," Cainen confessed. "Revenge is the easy guess, of course. But I've met the man. Revenge doesn't explain it all. You would be in a better position to know, Private. You *do* have his mind."

"I have no idea," Jared said.

"Well, perhaps it will come," Cainen said. "My warning is to remember that whatever it is that motivates him, he has given himself to it, entirely and completely. It's too late to convince him otherwise. The danger for you will be that if you meet him, you will empathize with him and with his motivation. You are *designed* to understand him, after all. Boutin will use this if he can."

"What should I do?" Jared asked.

"Remember who you are," Cainen said. "Remember that you're not him. And remember that you always have a choice."

"I'll remember," Jared said.

"I hope you do," Cainen said, and stood. "I wish you luck, Private. You can go now. When you leave, let Wilson know he can come back in." Cainen wandered over to a cabinet, intentionally choosing to put his back to Jared. Jared stepped out the door.

"You can go back in," Jared said to Wilson.

"Okay," Wilson said. "I hope you two had a useful conversation."

"It was," Jared said. "He's an interesting fellow."

"That's one way of putting it," Wilson said. "You know, Dirac, he feels very paternal toward you."

"So I gathered," Jared said. "I like it. Not exactly what I was expecting in a father, though."

Wilson chortled. "Life is full of surprises, Dirac," he said. "Where are you off to now?"

"I think I'll go see Cainen's granddaughter," Jared said.

• • •

The *Kestrel* flicked on its Skip Drive six hours before Jared returned to Phoenix Station and translated to the system of a dim orange star that from Earth would be seen in the Circinus constellation, but only if one had a proper telescope. It was there to pick through the remains of the Colonial Union freighter *Handy*; the black box data sent back to Phoenix via emergency Skip drone suggested that someone had sabotaged the engines. No black box data was ever recovered from the *Kestrel*; nothing of the *Kestrel* was ever recovered.

Lieutenant Cloud looked up from his lair in the pilots lounge, a table laid out with enticements to trap the unwary (namely, a deck of cards), and saw Jared in front of him.

"Well, if it isn't the jokester himself," Cloud said, smiling.

"Hello, Lieutenant," Jared said. "Long time, no see."

"Not my fault," Cloud said. "I've been here this whole time. Where have you been?"

"Out saving humanity," Jared said. "You know, the usual."

"It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it," Cloud said. "And I'm glad it's you instead of me." Cloud kicked his leg to push out a chair and picked up the cards. "Have a seat, why don't you. I'm due to the prelaunch formalities of my supply run in about fifteen minutes; that's just enough time to teach you how to lose at Texas hold 'em."

"I already know how to do that," Jared said.

"See? There's one of your jokes again," Cloud said.

"I actually came to see you about your supply run," Jared said. "I was hoping you'd let me deadhead down with you."

"I'll be happy to have you," Cloud said, and began shuffling the cards. "Ping me your leave clearance, and we'll be able to continue this game on board. The supply transport's on autopilot most of the way down anyway. I'm just on board so that if it crashes, they can say someone died."

"I don't have leave clearance," Jared said. "But I need to get down to Phoenix."

"What for?" Cloud asked.

“I need to visit a dead relative,” Jared said. “And I’m going to be shipping out soon.”

Cloud chuckled and cut the deck of cards. “I’m guessing the dead relative will be there when you get back,” he said.

“It’s not the dead relative I’m worried about,” Jared said. He reached his hand out and pointed to the deck. “May I?” Cloud handed over the deck; Jared sat and began shuffling it. “I can see you’re a gambling man, Lieutenant,” he said. He finished shuffling and put the deck in front of Cloud.

“Cut it,” Jared said. Cloud cut the deck a third of the way down. Jared took the smaller portion and placed it in front of himself. “We’ll pick a card from our decks at the same time. I get the high card, you take me to Phoenix, I go see who I need to see, I’m back before you lift.”

“And if I get the high card we try for two out of three,” Cloud said.

Jared smiled. “That wouldn’t be very sporting, now would it. Are you ready?” Cloud nodded. “Draw,” Jared said.

Cloud drew an eight of diamonds; Jared drew a six of clubs. “Damn,” Jared said. He pushed his cards over to Cloud.

“Who’s the dead relative?” Cloud asked, taking the cards.

“It’s complicated,” Jared said.

“Try me,” Cloud said.

“It’s the clone of the man whose consciousness I was created to house,” Jared said.

“Okay, so you were absolutely correct about this being complicated,” Cloud said. “I haven’t the slightest idea what you just said.”

“Someone who is like my brother,” Jared said. “Someone I didn’t know.”

“For someone who is just a year old, you lead an interesting life,” Cloud said.

“I know,” Jared said. “It’s not my fault, though.” He stood up. “I’ll catch you later, Lieutenant.”

“Oh, stop it,” Cloud said. “Give me a minute to take a leak and we’ll go. Just keep quiet when we get to the transport and let me do all

the talking. And remember if we get in trouble I'm going to blame it all on you."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Jared said.

Getting past the transport bay crew was almost ridiculously simple. Jared stuck close to Cloud, who ran through his preflight check and consulted his crew with businesslike efficiency. They ignored Jared or assumed that since he was with Cloud he had every right to be there. Thirty minutes later the transport was easing its way down to Phoenix Station, and Jared was showing Cloud that he wasn't actually very good at losing at Texas hold 'em. This annoyed Cloud greatly.

At the Phoenix Station ground port, Cloud consulted with the ground crew and then came back to Jared. "It's going to take them about three hours to load her up," he said. "Can you get to where you're going and be back before then?"

"The cemetery is just outside Phoenix City," Jared said.

"You should be fine then," Cloud said. "How are you going to get there?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Jared said.

"What?" Cloud said.

Jared shrugged. "I didn't actually think you'd take me," he confessed. "I didn't plan this far ahead."

Cloud laughed. "God loves a fool," he said, and then motioned to Jared. "Come on, then. Let's go meet your brother."

Metairie Catholic Cemetery lay in the heart of Metairie, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Phoenix City; it was around when Phoenix was still called New Virginia and Phoenix City was still Clinton, before the attacks that leveled the early colony and forced humans to regroup and reconquer the planet. The earliest graves in the cemetery dated back to the early days, when Metairie was a line of plastic and mud buildings, and proud Louisianans had settled there with the pretensions of its being Clinton's first suburb.

The graves Jared visited were on the other side of the cemetery from the first line of the dead. The graves were marked by a single headstone,

upon which three names were engraved, each with their separate dates: Charles, Cheryl and Zoë Boutin.

"Jesus," Cloud said. "An entire family."

"No," Jared said, kneeling down at the headstone. "Not really. Cheryl is here. Zoë died far away, and her body was lost with many others. And Charles isn't dead. This is someone else. A clone he created so it would look like he had killed himself." Jared reached out and touched the headstone. "There's no family here."

Cloud looked at Jared kneeling by the headstone. "I think I'll take a look around," he said, trying to give Jared some time.

"No," Jared said, and looked over. "Please. I'll be done in just a minute and then we can go." Cloud nodded in assent but looked toward the close-by trees. Jared returned his attention to the headstone.

He lied to Cloud about who he had come to see, because who he wanted to see wasn't here. Outside of a bit of pity, Jared found himself at an emotional loss regarding the poor nameless clone Boutin killed to fake his own death. Nothing in the still-emerging bank of memories Jared shared with Boutin featured the clone in anything but the most clinical of settings, emotional or otherwise; the clone wasn't a person to Boutin, but a means to an end—an end that Jared, naturally enough, had no memory of since the recording of his consciousness was done before Boutin pulled the trigger. Jared tried to feel some sympathy for the clone, but there were others here he had come for. Jared hoped the clone indeed had never woken up and left it at that.

Jared focused on the name Cheryl Boutin and felt muted, conflicted emotions echo back from his memory. Jared realized that while Boutin had affection for his wife, labeling that affection as love would have been overstating the case. The two married because they both wanted children and they both understood and liked being around the other well enough, although Jared sensed that even that emotional attachment had been tamped down by the end. Their mutual joy of their daughter kept them from separation; even their cooled relationship was tolerable and preferable to the mess of a divorce and the trouble it would cause their child.

From some crevasse in Jared's mind came an unexpected memory about Cheryl's death, that on her fatal trip she had not been hiking

alone; she had been with a friend who Boutin suspected was her lover. There was no jealousy that Jared could detect. Boutin didn't begrudge her a lover; he had one of his own. But Jared felt the anger Boutin felt at the funeral, when the suspected lover had lingered over the grave too long at the end of the funeral ceremony. It took time away from Boutin's final farewell to his wife. And Zoë's to her mother.

Zoë.

Jared traced her name on the gravestone, and said the name in the place she should have rested but did not, and felt again the grief that spilled from Boutin's memories into his own heart. Jared touched the gravestone once more, felt the name engraved into stone, and wept.

A hand rested on Jared's shoulder; he looked up to see Cloud there.

"It's all right," Cloud said. "We all lose the people we love."

Jared nodded. "I know," he said. "I lost someone I loved. Sarah. I felt her die and then I felt the hole she left inside me. But this is different."

"It's different because it's a child," Cloud said.

"It's a child I never knew," Jared said, and looked up at Cloud again. "She died before I was born. I didn't know her. I couldn't know her. But I *do*." He gestured to his temples. "Everything about her is in here. I remember her being born. I remember her first steps and her first words. I remember holding her here at her mother's funeral. I remember the last time I saw her. I remember hearing that she was dead. It's all *here*."

"No one has anyone else's memories," Cloud said. He said it in a way to soothe Jared. "It just doesn't work that way."

Jared laughed, bitterly. "But it *does,*" he said. "It does with me. I told you. I was born to hold someone else's mind. They didn't think that it worked, but it did. And now his memories are my memories. His life is my life. His daughter—"

Jared stopped talking, unable to go on. Cloud kneeled down next to Jared and put an arm around his shoulder and let him mourn.

"It's not fair," Cloud said eventually. "It's not fair you have to mourn this child."

Jared gave a small laugh. "We're in the wrong universe for fair," he said, simply.

"That we are," Cloud agreed.

"I *want* to mourn her," Jared said. "I feel her. I can feel the love I had for her. That *he* had for her. I want to remember her, even if that means I have to mourn her. That's not too much to bear for her memory. It's not, is it?"

"No," Cloud said. "I guess it's not."

"Thank you," Jared said. "Thank you for coming with me here. Thank you for helping me."

"That's what friends are for," Cloud said.

::Dirac,:: Jane Sagan said. She was standing behind them. ::You've been reactived.::

Jared felt the sudden snap of reintegration, and felt Jane Sagan's awareness wash over him, and felt mildly revolted by it even as other parts of him rejoiced at coming back into a larger sense of being. Some part of Jared's brain noted that being integrated wasn't just about sharing information and becoming part of a higher consciousness. It was also about control, a way to keep individuals tied to the group. There was a reason why Special Forces soldiers hardly ever retired—being retired means losing integration. Losing integration means being alone.

Special Forces soldiers were almost never alone. Even when they were by themselves.

::Dirac,:: Sagan said again.

"Speak normally," Jared said, and stood up, still looking away from Sagan. "You're being rude."

There was an infinitesimal pause before Sagan responded. "Very well," she said. "Private Dirac, it's time to go. We're needed back on Phoenix Station."

"Why?" Jared said.

"I'm not going to talk about it in front of him," Sagan said, indicating Cloud. "No offense, Lieutenant."

"None taken," Cloud said.

"Tell me out loud," Jared said. "Or I'm not going."

"I'm giving you an order," Sagan said.

"And I'm telling you to take your orders and shove them up your ass," Jared said. "I'm suddenly very tired of being part of Special

Forces. I'm tired of being shoved around from place to place. Unless you tell me where I'm going and why, I think I'm just staying right here."

Sagan audibly sighed. She turned to Cloud. "Believe me when I tell you that if any of this passes your lips, I will shoot you myself. At very close range."

"Lady," Cloud said. "I believe every word you say."

"Three hours ago the *Redhawk* was destroyed by the Obin," Sagan said. "It managed to launch a Skip drone before it was totally destroyed. We've lost two other ships in the last two days; they've entirely disappeared. We think the Obin tried to do the same with the *Redhawk* but weren't able to do it for whatever reason. We got lucky, if you want to call this lucky. Between these three ships and four other Special Forces ships that have disappeared in the last month, it's clear the Obin are targeting Special Forces."

"Why?" Jared said

"We don't know," Sagan said. "But General Szilard has decided we're not going to wait until more of our ships get attacked. We going in to get Boutin, Dirac. We move in twelve hours."

"That's crazy," Jared said. "All we know is that he's on Arist. That's an entire moon to look at. And no matter how many ships we use, we'll be attacking the Obin home system."

"We know where he is on Arist," Sagan said. "And we have a plan to get past the Obin to get him."

"How?"

"*That* I'm not saying out loud," Sagan said. "It's the end of discussion, Dirac. Come with me or don't. We've got twelve hours until the attack begins. You've already caused me to waste time coming down here to get you. Don't let's waste any more time getting back."

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ELEVEN

Goddamn it, General, Jane Sagan thought, as she tracked through the *Kite,* heading toward the landing bay control room. *Stop hiding from me, you officious prick*. She took care not to actually send the thought in the conversational mode of the Special Forces. Because of the similarity between thinking and speaking for Special Forces members, nearly every one of them had had a "did I say that out loud" moment or two. But that particular thought spoken aloud would be more trouble than it was worth.

Sagan had been on the hunt for General Szilard since the moment she had gotten the order to retrieve Jared Dirac from his AWOL adventure on Phoenix. The order had come with the notice that Dirac was once again under her command, and with a set of classified memos from Colonel Robbins detailing the latest events in Dirac's life: his trip to Covell, his sudden memory dump and the fact that his consciousness pattern was now definitively that of Charles Boutin. In addition to this material was a note forwarded by Robbins, from General Mattson to Szilard, in which Mattson strongly urged Szilard not to return Dirac to active duty, suggesting he be detained at least until the upcoming round of hostilities featuring the Obin was settled one way or another.

Sagan thought General Mattson was a jackass, but she had to admit he'd hit the nail on the head. Sagan had never been comfortable with Dirac under her command. He'd been a good and competent soldier, but knowing he had a second consciousness in his skull waiting to leak down and contaminate the first made her wary, and aware of the chance

that he'd crack on the mission and get someone killed besides himself. Sagan considered it a victory that when he *did* crack, that day on the Phoenix Station promenade, he was on shore leave. And it wasn't until Mattson swooped in to relieve her of further responsibility toward Dirac that she allowed herself to feel pity for him, and to recognize that he had never justified the suspicion she held him in.

That was then, Sagan thought. Now Dirac was back and he was certifiably around the bend. It had taken most of her will not to tear him a new asshole when he had been insubordinate on Phoenix; if she had had the stun pistol she used on him when he originally cracked, she would have shot him in the head a second time just to make the point that his transplanted attitude didn't impress her. As it was she could barely remain civil to him on the ride back, this time by fast courier shuttle, directly to the *Kite*'s bay. Szilard was on board, conferring with *Kite* commander Major Crick. The general had ignored Sagan's earlier hails when she was on the *Kite* and he was on Phoenix Station, but now that the two of them were on the same ship, she was prepared to block his path until she had her say. She marched herself up the stairwell, two steps at a time, and opened the door to the control room.

::I knew you were coming,:: Szilard said to her, as she entered the room. He was sitting in front of the control panel that operated the bay. The officer that operated the bay could do nearly all his tasks via BrainPal, of course, and usually did. The control panel was there as a backup. When it got right down to it, all the ship controls were essentially BrainPal backups.

::Of course you knew I was coming,:: Sagan said. ::You're the commander of the Special Forces. You can locate any of us from our BrainPal signal.::

::It wasn't that,:: Szilard said. ::I just know who you are. The possibility of you *not* coming to find me once I put Dirac back under your command didn't even cross my mind.:: Szilard turned his chair slightly and stretched out his legs. ::I was so confident you were coming that I even cleared out the room so we'd have some privacy. And here we are.::

::Permission to speak freely,:: Sagan asked.

::Of course,:: Szilard said.

::You're out of your goddamned mind, sir,:: Sagan said.

Szilard laughed out loud. ::I didn't expect you to speak *that* freely, Lieutenant,:: he said.

::You've seen the same reports I have,:: Sagan said. ::I know you're aware of how much Dirac is like Boutin now. Even his brain works the same. And yet you want to put him on a mission to find Boutin.::

::Yes,:: Szilard said.

"Christ!" Sagan said, out loud. Special Forces speak was fast and efficient but it wasn't very good for exclamations. Nevertheless, Sagan backed herself up, sending a wave of frustration and irritation toward General Szilard, which he accepted wordlessly. ::I don't want responsibility for him,:: Sagan said, finally.

::I don't remember asking you if you wanted the responsibility,:: Szilard said.

::He's a danger to the other soldiers in my platoon,:: Sagan said. ::And he's a danger to the mission. You know what it means if we don't succeed. We don't need the additional risk.::

::I disagree,:: Szilard said.

::For God's sake,:: Sagan said. ::*Why?*::

::"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer,":: Szilard said.

::What?:: Sagan said. She was suddenly reminded of a conversation with Cainen, months before, when he had said the same thing.

Szilard repeated the saying, then said, ::We have the enemy as close as he can possibly get. He's in our ranks, and he doesn't know he's the enemy. Dirac thinks he's one of us because as far as he knows he *is*. But now he thinks like our enemy thinks and acts like our enemy acts, and we'll know everything he knows. That's incredibly useful and it's worth the risk.::

::Unless he turns,:: Sagan said.

::You'll know it if he does,:: Szilard said. ::He's integrated with your whole platoon. The minute he acts against your interests you'll know about it and so will everyone else on the mission.::

::Integration isn't mind reading,:: Sagan said. ::We'll only know after he starts doing something. That means he could kill one of my soldiers or give away our positions or any number of other things. Even with integration he's still a real danger.::

::You're right about one thing, Lieutenant,: Szilard said. ::Integration isn't mind reading. Unless you have the right firmware.::

Sagan felt a ping in her communication queue: an upgrade to her BrainPal. Before she could give assent it began to unpack. Sagan felt an uncomfortable jolt as the upgrade propagated, causing a momentary flux in her brain's electrical patterns.

::What the hell was that?:: Sagan asked.

::That was the mind-reading upgrade,:: Szilard said. ::Usually only generals and certain very specialized military investigators get this one, but in your case, I think it's warranted. For this mission, anyway. Once you're back we're going to yank it back out, and if you ever speak about it to anyone we'll have to put you somewhere very small and distant.::

::I don't understand how this is possible,:: Sagan said.

Szilard made a face. ::Think about it, Lieutenant,:: he said. ::Think about how we're communicating. We're thinking, and our BrainPal is interpreting that we are choosing to speak to someone else when we do so. Outside of intent, there is no significant difference between our public thoughts and our private ones. What would be remarkable is if we *couldn't* read minds. It's what the BrainPal is supposed to do.::

::But you don't tell people that,:: Sagan said.

Szilard shrugged. ::No one wants to know they have no privacy, even in their own heads.::

::So you can read my private thoughts,:: Sagan said.

::You mean, like the one where you called me an officious prick?:: Szilard asked.

::There was context for that,:: Sagan said.

::There always is,:: Szilard said. ::Relax, Lieutenant. Yes, I can read your thoughts. I can read the thoughts of anyone who is in my command structure. But usually I *don't*. It's not necessary and most of the time it's almost completely useless anyway.::

::But you can read people's thoughts,:: Sagan said.

::Yes, but most people are *boring*,:: Szilard said. ::When I first got the upgrade, after I was put in command of the Special Forces, I spent an entire day listening to people's thoughts. You know what the vast majority of people are thinking the vast majority of the time? They're

thinking, I'm hungry. Or, I need to take a dump. Or, I want to fuck that guy. And then it's back to I'm hungry. And then they repeat the sequence until they die. Trust me, Lieutenant. A day with this capability and your opinion of the complexity and wonder of the human mind will suffer an irreversible decline.::

Sagan smiled. ::If you say so,:: she said.

::I do say so,:: Szilard said. ::However, in your case this capability will be of actual use, because you'll be able to hear Dirac's thoughts and feel his private emotions without him knowing he's being observed. If he is thinking of treason, you'll know it almost before he does. You can react to it before Dirac kills one of your soldiers or compromises your mission. I think that's a sufficient check to the risk of bringing him along.::

::And what should I do if he turns?:: Sagan asked. ::If he becomes a traitor?::

::Then you kill him, of course,:: Szilard said. ::Don't hesitate about it. But you be *sure,* Lieutenant. Now you know that I can get inside your head, so I trust you'll refrain from blowing his head off just because you're feeling twitchy.::

::Yes, General,:: Sagan said.

::Good,:: Szilard said. ::Where is Dirac now?::

::He's with the platoon, getting ready, down there in the bay. I gave him our orders on the way up,:: Sagan said.

::Why don't you check in on him?:: Szilard asked.

::With the upgrade?:: Sagan asked.

::Yes,:: Szilard said. ::Learn to use it before your mission. You're not going to have time to fiddle with it later.::

Sagan accessed her new utility, found Dirac, and listened in.

::This is nuts,:: Jared thought to himself.

::You got that right,:: Steven Seaborg said. He'd joined 2nd Platoon while Jared had been away.

::Did I say that out loud?:: Jared said.

::No, I read minds, you jerk,:: Seaborg said, and sent a ping of amusement Jared's way. Whatever issues Jared and Seaborg had had

disappeared after the death of Sarah Pauling; Seaborg's jealousy of Jared, or whatever it was, was outweighed by their mutual feeling of the loss of Sarah. Jared would hesitate to call him a friend, but the bond they had was more amicable than not, now reinforced by their additional bond of integration.

Jared glanced around the bay, at the two dozen Skip Drive sleds in it—the total fleet of Skip Drive sleds that had been produced to that point. He looked over at Seaborg, who was climbing into one to check it out.

::So this is what we're going to use to attack an entire planet,:: Seaborg said. ::A couple dozen Special Forces soldiers, each in their own space-traveling gerbil cage.::

::You've seen a gerbil cage?:: Jared asked.

::Of course not,:: Seaborg said. ::I've never even seen a gerbil. But I've seen pictures, and that's what this looks like to me. What sort of idiot would ride in one of these things.::

::I've ridden in one,:: Jared said.

::That answers that,:: Seaborg said. ::And what was it like?::

::I felt exposed,:: Jared said.

::Wonderful,:: Seaborg said, and rolled his eyes.

Jared knew how he felt, but he also saw the logic behind the assault. Nearly all space-faring creatures used ships to get from one point to another in real space; planetary detection and defense grids, by necessity, had the resolution power to detect the large objects that ships tended to be. The Obin defense grid around Arist was no different. A Special Forces ship would be spotted and attacked in an instant; a tiny, wire-frame object barely larger than a man would not.

Special Forces knew this because it had already sent the sleds on six different occasions, sneaking through the defense grid to spy on the communications coming off the moon. It was on the last of these missions that they heard Charles Boutin on a communication beam, broadcasting in the open, sending a voice note toward Obinur asking about the arrival time of a supply ship. The Special Forces soldier who had caught the signal chased it down to its source, a small science outpost on the shore of one of Arist's many large islands. He'd waited

to hear a second transmission from Boutin to confirm his location before he returned.

Upon hearing this fact, Jared had accessed the recorded file to hear the voice of the man he was supposed to have been. He'd heard Boutin's voice before, on voice recordings that Wilson and Cainen had played for him; the voice on those recordings was the same as the one on this one. Older, creakier and more stressed, but there was no mistaking the timbre or cadence. Jared was aware just how much Boutin's sounded like his own, which was to be expected and also more than a little disconcerting.

I've got a strange life, Jared thought, and then glanced up to make sure the thought hadn't leaked. Seaborg was still examining the sled and gave no indication of having heard him.

Jared walked through the collection of sleds toward another object in the room, a spherical object slightly larger than the sleds itself. It was a piece of interesting Special Forces skullduggery called a "capture pod," used when Special Forces had something or someone they wanted to evacuate but couldn't evacuate themselves. Inside the sphere was a hollow designed to hold a single member of most midsized intelligent species; Special Forces soldiers shoved them in, sealed the pod, and then backed off as the pod's lifters blasted the pod toward the sky. Inside the pod a strong antigravity field kicked in when the lifters did, otherwise the occupant would be flattened. The pod would then be retrieved by a Special Forces ship located overhead.

The capture pod was for Boutin. The plan was simple: Attack the science station where they had located Boutin, and disable its communications. Grab Boutin and stuff him into the capture pod, which would head out to Skip Drive distance—the *Kite* would pop in just long enough to grab the pod and then get out before the Obin could give chase. After Boutin's capture, the science station would be destroyed with an old favorite: a meteor just large enough to wipe the station off the planet, which would hit just far enough away from the station that no one would get suspicious. In this case it would be a hit in the ocean several miles off the coast, so the science station would be obliterated in the ensuing tsunami. The Special Forces had been working with falling rocks for decades; they knew how to make it look

like an accident. If everything went to plan, the Obin wouldn't even know they had been attacked.

To Jared's eye, there were two major flaws in the plan, both interrelated. The first was that the Skip Drive sleds could not land; they wouldn't survive contact with Arist's atmosphere, and even if they did, they wouldn't be steerable once they were in it. The members of 2nd Platoon on the mission would pop out into real space on the edge of Arist's atmosphere and then perform a near-space skydive down to the surface. Members of 2nd Platoon had done it before—Sagan had done it at the Battle of Coral and was none the worse for wear—but it struck Jared as asking for trouble.

The method of their arrival created the second major flaw in the plan: There was no simple way to extract the 2nd Platoon after the mission was completed. Once Boutin was captured, the 2nd's orders were ominous: Get as far away from the science station as possible, so as not to die in the scheduled tsunami (the mission plan had thoughtfully provided a map to a nearby high point that they figured should—*should*—stay dry during the deluge), and then hike into the uninhabited interior of the island to hide out for several days until Special Forces could send a clutch of capture pods to retrieve them. It would take more than one round of capture pod retrievals to evacuate all twenty-four members of the 2nd that would be on the mission, and Sagan had already informed Jared that he and she would be the last people off the planet.

Jared frowned at the memory of Sagan's pronouncement. Sagan had never been a big fan of his, he knew, and he knew that was because she was aware from the start that he'd been bred out of a traitor. She'd known more about him than he had. Her farewell when he was transferred to Mattson seemed sincere enough, but since he'd seen her at the cemetery, and been returned to her command, she'd seemed genuinely angry with him, as if he actually *was* Boutin. On one level Jared could sympathize—after all, as Cainen noted, he was more like Boutin now than he was like his older self—but on a more immediate level Jared resented being treated like the enemy. Jared wondered darkly if the reason Sagan was having him stay behind with her was so she could take care of him without anyone knowing.

Then he shook the idea out of his head. Sagan was capable of killing him, he was sure. But she wouldn't unless he gave her a reason. *Best not to give her a reason,* Jared thought.

Anyway, it wasn't Sagan he was worried about, it was Boutin himself. The mission anticipated some resistance from the small Obin military presence at the science station, but none from the scientists or from Boutin. This struck Jared as wrong. Jared had Boutin's anger in his head and knew the intelligence of the man, even if the details of all his work remained unclear to him. Jared doubted Boutin would go without a fight. This didn't mean Boutin would take up arms—he emphatically wasn't a warrior—but Boutin's weapon was his brain. It was Boutin's brain formulating a way to betray the Colonial Union that had put them all in this position to begin with. It was a bad assumption that they would simply be able to snatch and stuff Boutin. He almost certainly had a surprise in store.

What that surprise would be, however, eluded Jared.

::You hungry?:: Seaborg asked Jared. ::Because thinking about how insane a mission is going to be always makes me want to eat.::

Jared grinned. ::You must be hungry a lot.::

::One of the benefits of being Special Forces,:: Seaborg said. ::That and skipping the awkward teenage years.::

::Studying up on teenagers?:: Jared asked.

::Sure,:: Seaborg said. ::Because if I'm lucky I'll get to be one one day.::

::You just said we get to skip the awkward teenage years,:: Jared said.

::Well, when I get there they won't be awkward,:: Seaborg said. ::Now come on. It's lasagna tonight.::

They went to get something to eat.

Sagan opened her eyes.

::How did it go?:: asked Szilard, who had been watching her as she listened in to Jared.

::Dirac's worried that we're underestimating Boutin,:: Sagan said. ::That he's planned for being attacked in some way we've missed.::

::Good,:: Szilard said. ::Because I feel the same way. *That's* why I want Dirac on the mission.::

Arist, green and cloudy, filled Jared's vision, surprising him with its immensity. Popping into existence at the bare edge of a planet's atmosphere with nothing but a carbon fiber cage around you was profoundly disturbing; Jared felt like he was going to fall. Which was of course exactly what he was doing.

Enough of this, he thought, and began disconnecting himself from his sled. Planetward, Jared located the five other members of his squad, all of whom translated before him: Sagan, Seaborg, Daniel Harvey, Anita Manley and Vernon Wigner. He also spotted the capture pod, and breathed a sigh of relief. The capture pod's mass was just short of the five-ton mark; there was a small but real concern it would be too massive to use the mini–Skip Drive. All of Jared's squad had pulled themselves from their sleds and were free-floating, slowly drifting from the spidery vehicles that had brought them this far.

The six of them were the forward force; their job was to guide down the capture pod and secure a landing area for the remaining members of 2nd Platoon, who would be following quickly behind. The island Boutin was on was carpeted with a thick tropical forest, which made any landing difficult; Sagan had chosen a small meadowed area about fifteen klicks from the science station to land at.

::Keep dispersed,:: Sagan said to her squad. ::We'll regroup when we get through the worst of the atmosphere. Radio silence until you hear from me.::

Jared maneuvered himself to look at Arist and drank it in until his BrainPal, sensing the first tenuous effects of the atmosphere, wrapped him in a protective sphere of nanobots that flowed from a pack on his back and secured him in the middle, to keep him from making contact with the sphere and crisping himself where they intersected. The inside of the sphere let in no light; Jared was suspended in a small, dark private universe.

Left to his own thoughts, Jared returned to the Obin, the implacable and fascinating race whose company Boutin kept. The

Colonial Union's records of the Obin went all the way back to the beginning of the Union, when a discussion over who owned a planet the human settlers had named Casablanca ended with the settlers removed with horrifying efficiency, and the Colonial Forces charged with taking back the planet likewise utterly routed. The Obin wouldn't surrender and would not take prisoners. Once they decided they wanted something they kept coming at it until they had it.

Get in their way enough and they would decide it was in their interest to remove you permanently. The Ala, who had fashioned the diamond dome of the general's mess at Phoenix, were not the first race the Obin had methodically wiped out, nor the last.

The one saving grace about the Obin was that they were not particularly acquisitive as starfaring races went. The Colonial Union would start ten colonies in the time it took the Obin to start one, and while the Obin were not shy about taking a planet held by another race when it suited them, it didn't suit them all that often. Omagh had been the first planet since Casablanca that the Obin had taken from humans, and even then it appeared that it was more of a case of opportunism (taking it from the Rraey, who presumably had fought to get it from the humans) than genuine expansion. The Obin reluctance to unnecessarily expand the race's holdings was one of the primary reasons the CDF suspected someone else had initiated the attack. If, as was suspected, it had been the Rraey who attacked Omagh and then managed to keep it, the Colonial Union would almost certainly have retaliated and attempted to take back the colony. The Rraey knew when to quit.

The other interesting thing about the Obin—which made their putative alliance with the Rraey and the Enesha so puzzling to Jared—was that in general, unless you were in their way or trying to get into their face, the Obin were utterly uninterested in other intelligent races. They kept no embassies nor had official communication with other races; as far as the Colonial Union was aware never once did the Obin ever formally declare war *or* sign a treaty with any other race. If you were at war with the Obin, you knew it because they were shooting at you. If you weren't at war with them, they had no communication with you at all. The Obin were not xenophobes; that would imply they

hated other races. They simply didn't care about them. That the Obin, of all races, would align with not one but two other races was extraordinary; that they would align against the Colonial Union was ominous.

Underneath all of the data about Obin's relations—or lack thereof—with other intelligent races was a rumor about the race that the CDF did not give much credence to, but noted due to its widespread belief among other races: The Obin did not evolve intelligence but were given it by another race. The CDF discounted the rumor because the idea that any of the fiercely competitive races in this part of the galaxy would take the time to uplift some rock-banging underachievers was unlikely to the point of ridiculousness. The CDF knew of races who had exterminated the near-intelligent creatures they had discovered on the real estate they wanted, on the grounds that it was never too early to eliminate a competitor. It had known of none that did the opposite.

If the rumor were true, it would rather strongly imply that the intelligent designers of the Obin were the Consu, the only species in the local neighborhood with the high-end technological means to attempt a species-wide uplift, and also the philosophical motive, given that the Consu's racial mission was to bring all other intelligent species in the area into a state of perfection (i.e., like the Consu). The problem with that theory was that the Consu's method of bringing other races closer to Consu-like perfection usually involved forcing some poor hapless race to fight them, or pitting one lesser race against another, as the Consu did when they matched humans against the Rraey for the Battle of Coral. Even the species most likely to have created another intelligent species was more likely to destroy one instead, directly or indirectly, the race a victim of not meeting the Consu's high and inscrutable standards.

The Consu's high and inscrutable standards were the primary argument against the Consu creating the Obin, because the Obin, unique among all intelligent races, had almost no culture to speak of. What few xenographical studies of the Obin had been done by humans or other races discovered that aside from a spare and utilitarian language, and a facility for practical technology, the Obin produced nothing of creative note: No significant art across any of their

perceivable senses, no literature, no religion or philosophy that xenographers could recognize as such. The Obin barely even had politics, which was unheard of. The Obin society was so bereft of culture that one researcher contributing to the CDF file on the Obin suggested quite seriously that it was an open question whether Obin performed casual conversation—or indeed were even capable of it. Jared was no expert on the Consu, but it seemed unlikely to him that a people so concerned with the ineffable and eschatological would create a people incapable of concerning themselves with either. If the Obin were what happened with intelligent design, it was an affirming argument for the value of evolution.

The sphere of nanobots surrounding Jared flung away and behind. He blinked furiously in the light until his eyes adjusted, and then sensed around for his squad. Tightbeams found him and highlighted the others, their bodies almost invisible thanks to their input-sensitive unitards; even the capture pod was camoed. Jared floated toward the capture pod to check its status but was warned away from it by Sagan, who checked it herself. Jared and the rest of the squad grouped closer together but not so close they would get in each other's way when they deployed their chutes.

The squad deployed chutes at the lowest possible height; even camouflaged, parachutes could be seen by an eye that knew what to look for. The capture pod's parachute was immense and designed to support dramatic air-braking; it made impressive snapping sounds as the nanobot-created canopy formed, filled with air and then violently tore apart, only to form again a second later. Finally the capture pod slowed enough that its parachute held.

Jared turned to the science station, several klicks to the south, and upped the magnification on his cowl to see if there was any movement at the science station that would suggest they had been seen. He saw nothing and had his observation confirmed by Wigner and Harvey. Moments later they were all on the ground, grunting as they moved the capture pod past the edge of the meadow and into the woods, and then moving quickly to augment its camouflage with foliage.

::Everyone remember where we parked,:: Seaborg said.

::Quiet,:: Sagan said, and appeared to be focusing on something internal. ::That was Roentgen,:: she said. ::The others are getting ready to deploy chutes.:: She hoisted her Empee. ::Come on, let's make sure there aren't any surprises.::

Jared felt a peculiar sensation, like his brain being picked.

::Oh, shit,:: Jared said.

Sagan turned to look at him. ::What?:: she said.

::We're in *trouble,* Jared said, and halfway through saying it Jared felt his integration with his squad violently cut off. He gasped and clutched his head, overwhelmed by the feeling of having one of his major senses ripped out of his skull. Around him Jared saw and heard the other squad members collapsing, crying out and vomiting from the pain and disorientation. He fell to his knees and tried to breathe. He retched.

Jared struggled back to his feet and stumbled over to Sagan, who was on her knees, wiping her mouth from vomiting. He grabbed her arm and tried to pull her up. "Come on," Jared said. "We have to get up. We have to hide."

"Wha—" Sagan coughed and spat, and looked up at Jared. "What's going on?"

"We're cut off," Jared said. "It's happened to me before, when I was at Covell. The Obin are blocking us from using our BrainPals."

"How?" Sagan yelled the question, too loudly.

"I don't know," Jared said.

Sagan stood up. "It's Boutin," she said, groggily. "He told them how. Must have."

"Maybe," Jared said. Sagan wobbled slightly; Jared steadied her and came around to face her. "We have to move, Lieutenant," he said. "If the Obin are blocking us, that means they know we're here. They're coming for us. We have to get our people up and moving."

"We have more people coming," Sagan said. "Have to…" She stopped, and straightened, as if something cold and horrible had just washed over her. "Oh, my God," she said. "Oh, my God." She looked up into the sky.

"What is it?" Jared asked, and looked up, scanning for the tell-tale subtle ripples of camouflaged parachutes. It took him a second to

realize he didn't see any. It took him another second to realize what it meant.

"Oh, my God," Jared said.

Alex Roentgen's first guess was that he managed to lose his tightbeam connection with the rest of the platoon.

Well, shit, he thought, and shifted his position, spread-eagling and spinning a few times to let the tightbeam receiver seek out and locate the other members of the platoon, letting his BrainPal extrapolate their positions based on where they had been on their last transmission. He didn't need to find them all; just one would do nicely and then he would be reconnected, reintegrated.

Nothing.

Roentgen pushed his concerns away. He'd lost tightbeam before—only once, but once was enough to know it happened. He had reconnected when he made it to ground then; he'd do it again this time. He didn't have any more time to waste on it anyway because he was coming up on deployment altitude; they were deploying as low as possible to cover their tracks, so when to deploy was a matter of some precision. Roentgen checked his BrainPal to determine his altitude and it was then he realized that for the last minute he'd had no contact with his BrainPal at all.

Roentgen spent ten seconds processing the thought; it refused to process. Then tried again and this time his brain not only refused to process it but pushed back against it, expelling it violently, knowing the consequences of accepting the thought as truth. He attempted to access his BrainPal once, and then again and then again and then again and then again, each time fighting back a sense of panic that fed on itself exponentially. He called out inside his head. No one answered. No one had heard him. He was alone.

Alex Roentgen lost most of his mind then, and for the rest of his fall twisted and kicked and tore at the sky, screaming with a voice he used so rarely that some small, disassociated part of his brain marveled at the sound of it in his skull. His parachute did not deploy; it, like nearly every physical object and mental process Roentgen used, was

controlled and activated by his BrainPal, a piece of equipment that had been so reliable for so long that the Colonial Defense Forces had simply stopped thinking of it as equipment and considered it as a given, like the rest of the brain and the soldier's physical body. Roentgen plummeted past the deployment line unknowing, uncaring, and insensate to the implications of passing through that final barrier.

It wasn't the knowledge that he was going to die that had driven Roentgen insane. It was being alone, separated, unintegrated for the first time and the last time in the six years he had been alive. In that time he'd felt the lives of his platoon mates in every intimate detail, how they fought, how they fucked, every moment that they lived, and the moment when they died. He took comfort in knowing he was there in their final moments and that others would be there for him in his. But they wouldn't be, and he wouldn't be there for them. The terror of his separation was matched by the shame of not being able to comfort his friends who were plunging to the same death as he was.

Alex Roentgen twisted again, faced the ground that would kill him, and screamed the scream of the abandoned.

Jared watched in dread as the pinwheeling gray dot above him appeared to gain speed in the final few seconds and, revealed as a screaming human, ground into the meadow with a sickening, splashy thud, followed by a horrifying bounce. The impact shocked Jared out of immobility. He shoved Sagan, screaming at her to run, and ran toward the others, hauling them up and shoving them toward the tree line, trying to make them get out of the way of the falling bodies.

Seaborg and Harvey had recovered but were staring at the sky, watching their friends die. Jared pushed Harvey and slapped Seaborg, yelling at both of them to move. Wigner refused to move and lay there, seemingly catatonic; Jared picked him up and handed him to Seaborg and told him to move. He reached down for Manley; she pushed him away and began crawling toward the meadow, screeching. She picked herself up and ran as bodies tore apart on impact around her. Sixty meters out she stopped, turned around rapidly and screamed away the rest of her sanity. Jared turned away and missed seeing the leg of the

body that fell next to her clip her on the neck and shoulder, crushing arteries and bones and driving shattered ribs into her lungs and heart. Manley's scream clipped off with a grunt.

From the first hit, it took only two minutes for the rest of 2nd Platoon to hit the ground. Jared and the rest of his squad watched from the tree line as they fell.

When it was over, Jared turned to the four remaining members of the squad and took stock. All of them seemed to be in varying stages of shock, with Sagan being the most responsive and Wigner the least, although he finally seemed aware of his surroundings. Jared felt sick but was otherwise functioning; he'd spent enough time out of integration that he could function without it. For the moment, at least, he was in charge.

He turned to Sagan. "We need to move," he said. "Into the trees. Away from here."

"The mission—" Sagan began.

"There is no mission anymore," Jared said. "They know we're here. We're going to die if we stay."

The words seemed to help clear Sagan's head. "Someone needs to go back," she said. "Take the capture pod. Let the CDF know." She looked directly at him. "Not you."

"Not me," Jared agreed. He knew she said it because she was suspicious of him, but he didn't have time to worry about it. He couldn't go back because he was the only one who was entirely functional. "You go back," he suggested to Sagan.

"No," Sagan said. Flat. Final.

"Seaborg, then," Jared said. After Sagan, Seaborg was the next most functional; he could tell the CDF what had happened, and tell them to prepare for the worst.

"Seaborg," Sagan agreed.

"Okay," Jared said, and turned to Seaborg. "Come on, Steve. Let's get you in this thing."

Seaborg wobbled over and began removing foliage from the capture pod to get to the door, moved to open the entry and then stopped.

"What is it?" Jared said.

"How do I open this?" Seaborg said, his voice squeaky from nonuse.

"Use your…*fuck,*" Jared said. The capture pod opened via BrainPal.

"Well, this is just fucking *perfect,*" Seaborg said, and slumped angrily next to the pod.

Jared moved to Seaborg, and then stopped and cocked his head.

In the distance, something was coming closer, and whatever it was was not worried about sneaking up on them.

"What is it?" Sagan said.

"Someone's coming," Jared said. "More than one. The Obin. They've found us."

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TWELVE

They managed to elude the Obin for half an hour before they were cornered.

The squad would have been better off separating, drawing the pursuing Obin in several directions and opening up the possibility of one or more of its number slipping away at the sacrifice of the others. But they stayed together, compensating for the lack of integration by staying in each other's sight. Jared led the way at first, Sagan taking up the rear to drag along Wigner. Somewhere along the way Jared and Sagan traded roles, Sagan taking them largely north, away from the Obin pursuing them.

A distant whine became louder; Jared looked up through the tree canopy and saw an Obin aircraft pacing the squad and then heading north. Ahead, Sagan skipped to the right and headed east; she'd heard the aircraft as well. A few minutes later a second aircraft appeared and paced the squad again, dropping down to about ten meters above the canopy. There was an immense rattle and branches fell and exploded around them; the Obin had opened fire. Sagan skidded to a stop as huge-caliber slugs blew up dirt directly in front of her. That was that for going east; the squad turned north. The aircraft turned and paced them, offering bullets when they lagged or when they deviated too far to the east or west. The aircraft wasn't giving chase; it was herding them efficiently toward an unknown destination.

That destination appeared ten minutes later when the squad emerged into another, smaller meadow, this one with the Obin who had

been in the first aircraft waiting for them. Behind them the second aircraft was preparing to land; behind that the initial group of Obin, who had never been far behind, was now becoming visible through the trees.

Wigner, still not entirely recovered from the mental trauma of being unplugged, pushed away from Jared and raised his Empee, apparently determined not to go out without a fight. He sighted in at the group of Obin waiting for them in the meadow and yanked at the trigger. Nothing happened. To keep the Empee from being used against CDF soldiers by their enemies, the Empee required a BrainPal verification to fire. It got none. Wigner snarled in frustration, and then everything above his eyebrows disappeared as a single shot took off the top of his head. He collapsed; in the distance Jared could see an Obin soldier lowering a weapon.

Jared, Sagan, Harvey and Seaborg came together, drew their combat knives and put their backs to each other, each facing a different direction. Drawing their knives was a futile gesture of defiance; none of them pretended to imagine that the Obin needed to get within an arm's reach to kill them all. Each took some small comfort in knowing they'd die within arm's reach of each other. It wasn't integration, but it was the best they could hope for.

By this time the second aircraft had landed; from inside the craft six Obin emerged, three carrying weapons, two with other equipment, and one empty-handed. The empty-handed one swayed over to the humans in the Obin's peculiarly graceful gait, and stopped a prudent distance away, its back covered by the three weapon-wielding Obin. Its blinking multiple eyes appeared to fix on Sagan, who was closest to it.

"Surrender," it said, in sibilant but clear English.

Sagan blinked. "Excuse me?" she said. As far as she knew, the Obin never took prisoners.

"Surrender," it said again. "You will die if you do not."

"You will let us live if we surrender," Sagan said.

"Yes," the Obin said.

Jared glanced over to Sagan, who was to his right; he could see her chewing over the offer. The offer looked good to Jared; the Obin might kill them if they surrendered, but they would definitely kill them if

they didn't. He didn't offer the opinion to Sagan; he knew she didn't trust him or want to hear his opinion about anything.

"Drop your weapons," Sagan said, finally. Jared dropped his knife and unslung his Empee; the others did likewise. The Obin also had them remove their packs and belts, leaving only their unitards. A couple of the Obin who had been in the original group pursuing them came over and picked up the weapons and equipment and hauled them back to the airship. When one walked in front of Harvey, Jared could feel him tense up; Jared suspected Harvey was trying very hard not to kick it.

Their weapons and equipment removed, Jared and the others were made to stand apart from each other while the two Obin bearing equipment waved said equipment over each of them, searching, Jared suspected, for hidden weapons. The two Obin scanned the other three and then came to Jared, only to cut their examination short. One of them offered up a fluty comment to the head Obin in its native language. The head Obin came over to Jared, two armed Obin trailing it.

"You come with us," it said.

Jared glanced over at Sagan, looking for clues on how she wanted him to play this and getting nothing. "Where am I going?" Jared asked.

The head Obin turned and trilled something. One of the Obin behind him raised his weapon and shot Steve Seaborg in the leg. Seaborg went down screaming.

The head Obin swiveled its attention back to Jared. "You come with us," it said again.

"Jesus fuck, Dirac!" Seaborg said. "Go with the fucking Obin!"

Jared stepped out of line and allowed himself to be escorted to the aircraft.

Sagan watched Jared step out of line and briefly considered lunging and snapping his neck, depriving the Obin and Boutin of their prize and assuring that Dirac wouldn't have the opportunity to do anything stupid. The moment passed, and besides, it would have been a long shot

anyway. And then they would all almost certainly be dead. As it was now they were still alive.

The head Obin turned its attention to Sagan, whom it recognized as the squad's leader. "You will stay," it said, and gamboled off before Sagan could say anything. She stepped forward to address the retreating Obin, but as she did three Obin came forward, brandishing weapons. Sagan put her hands up and backed away, but the Obin continued forward, motioning to Sagan that she and the rest of the squad needed to move.

She turned to Seaborg, who was still on the ground. "How's your leg?" she asked.

"The unitard caught most of it," he said, referring to the uniform's ability to stiffen and absorb some of the impact of a projectile. "It's not too bad. I'll live."

"Can you walk?" Sagan asked.

"As long as I'm not required to like it," Seaborg said.

"Come on, then," Sagan said, and held out her hand to help Seaborg up. "Harvey, get Wigner." Daniel Harvey walked over to the dead soldier and picked him up in a fireman's carry.

They were being herded into a depression slightly off-center from the middle of the meadow; the small spray of trees within it suggested the bedrock below had eroded away. As they arrived at the depression, Sagan heard the whine of an airship departing and a second whine of one arriving. The arriving craft, larger than the other two had been, landed near the depression, and from its guts rolled a series of identical machines.

"What the hell are those?" Harvey asked, setting down Wigner's body. Sagan didn't answer; she watched as the machines positioned themselves around the perimeter of the bowl, eight in all. The Obin who had come with the machines scrambled to the top of the machines and retracted the metal coverings, revealing large, multibarrel fléchette guns. When all the covers had been retracted, one of the Obin activated the fléchette guns; they powered up ominously, and began to track objects.

"It's a fence," Sagan said. "They've locked us in here." Sagan took an experimental step toward one of the guns; it swung toward her and

tracked her movement. She took another step forward and it emitted a painful, high-pitched squeal, which Sagan assumed was designed to serve as a proximity warning. Sagan imagined that another step toward the gun would result in her foot being shot off at the very least, but she did not bother to test the proposition. She backed away from the gun; it turned off its siren but did not stop tracking her until she had retreated several steps.

"They had those here just waiting for us," Harvey said. "Very nice. What do you think are the odds?"

Sagan stared back up at the guns. "The odds are bad," Sagan said.

"What do you mean?" Harvey said.

"These are from the science station," Sagan said, motioning to the guns. "They have to be. There's no other sort of installation anywhere close to here. These aren't the sort of things a science station would just have lying around. They've used them here before to hold people in."

"Yeah, okay," Seaborg said. "But who? And why?"

"We've had six Special Forces ships disappear," Sagan said, omitting the one the Obin attacked and destroyed. "Those crews went somewhere. Maybe they were brought here."

"That still doesn't answer why," Seaborg said.

Sagan shrugged. She hadn't figured out that part yet.

The air was filled with the sound of the airships lifting off. The noise of their engines attenuated away, leaving nothing but the ambient sounds of nature behind.

"Great," Harvey said. He chucked a stone at one of the guns; it tracked the rock but didn't fire on it. "We're out here with no food, water or shelter. What you think the odds are that the Obin are never coming back for us?"

Sagan thought those odds were very good indeed.

"So you're me," Charles Boutin said to Jared. "Funny. I thought I'd be taller."

Jared said nothing. On arrival at the science station he had been confined to a crèche, tightly secured, and wheeled through the high, bare hallways until he arrived at what he assumed was a laboratory,

filled with unfamiliar machines. Jared was left there for what seemed like hours before Boutin entered and strolled right up to the crèche, examining Jared physically as if he were a large and really interesting bug. Jared hoped Boutin would come up far enough to receive a head butt. He did not.

"That was a joke," Boutin said to Jared.

"I know," Jared said. "It just wasn't funny."

"Well," Boutin said. "I'm out of practice. You may have noticed the Obin are not the sort to crack wise."

"I noticed," Jared said. During the entire trip to the science station, the Obin were utterly silent. The only words the head Obin had said to Jared were "get out" when they arrived and "get in" when they opened the portable crèche.

"You can blame the Consu for that," Boutin said. "When they made the Obin, I guess they forgot to drop in a humor module. Among the many other things they apparently forgot."

Despite himself—or because of whose memories and personality he held in his head—Jared's attention focused. "Then it's true?" he asked. "The Consu uplifted the Obin."

"If you want to call it that," Boutin said. "Although the word *uplift* by its nature implies good intentions on the part of the up-lifter, which is not in evidence here. From what I can get from the Obin, the Consu one day wondered what would happen if you made some species smart. So they came to Obinur, found an omnivore in a minor ecological niche, and gave it intelligence. You know, just to see what would happen next."

"What happened next?" Jared said.

"A long and cascading series of unintended consequences, my friend," Boutin said. "That end, for now, with you and me here in this lab. It's a direct line from there to here."

"I don't understand," Jared said.

"Of course you don't," Boutin said. "You don't have all the data. I didn't have all the data before I came here, so even if you know everything I know, you wouldn't know that. How much of what I know *do* you know?"

Jared said nothing. Boutin smiled. "Enough, anyway," he said. "I can tell you have some of my same interests. I saw how you perked up when I talked about the Consu. But maybe we should start with the simple things. Like: What is your name? I find it disconcerting to talk to my sort-of clone without having something to call you."

"Jared Dirac," Jared said.

"Ah," Boutin said. "Yes, the Special Forces naming protocol. Random first name, notable scientist last name. I did some work with the Special Forces at one time—indirectly, since you people don't like non–Special Forces getting in your way. What is that name you call us?"

"Realborn," Jared said.

"Right," Boutin said. "You like keeping yourself apart from the realborn. Anyway, the naming protocol of the Special Forces always amused me. The pool of last names is actually pretty limited: A couple hundred or so, and mostly classical European scientists. Not to mention the first names! Jared. Brad. Cynthia. John. *Jane.*" The names came out as a good-natured sneer. "Hardly a non-Western name among them, and for no good reason, since Special Forces aren't recruited from Earth like the rest of the CDF. You could have been called Yusef al-Biruni and it would have been all the same to you. The set of names Special Forces uses implicitly says something about the point of view of the people who created them, and created you. Don't you think?"

"I like my name, *Charles,*" Jared said.

"Touché," Boutin said. "But I got my name through family tradition, where yours was just mixed and matched. Not that there's anything wrong with 'Dirac.' Named for Paul Dirac, no doubt. Ever heard of the 'Dirac sea'?"

"No," Jared said.

"Dirac proposed that what vacuum really was, was a vast sea of negative energy," Boutin said. "And that's a lovely image. Some physicists at the time thought it was an inelegant hypothesis, and maybe it was. But it was poetic, and they didn't appreciate that aspect. But that's physicists for you. Not exactly brimming over with poetry. The Obin are excellent physicists, and not one of them has any more

poetry than a chicken. They definitely wouldn't appreciate the Dirac sea. How are you feeling?"

"Constrained," Jared said. "And I need to piss."

"So piss," Boutin said. "I don't mind. The crèche is self-cleaning, of course. And I'm sure your unitard can wick away the urine."

"Not without talking to my BrainPal about it," Jared said. Without communicating with the owner's BrainPal, the nanobots in the unitard's fabric only maintained basic defensive properties, like impact stiffening, designed to keep the owner safe through loss of consciousness or BrainPal trauma. Secondary capabilities, like the ability to drain away sweat and urine, were deemed nonessential.

"Ah," Boutin said. "Well, here. Let me fix that." Boutin went to an object on one of the lab tables and pressed on it. Suddenly the thick cotton batting in Jared's skull lifted; his BrainPal functionality was back. Jared ignored his need to piss in a frantic attempt to try to contact Jane Sagan.

Boutin watched Jared with a small smile on his face. "It won't work," he said, after a minute of watching Jared's inner exertions. "The antenna here is strong enough to cause wave interference for about ten meters. It works in the lab and that's about it. Your friends are still jammed up. You can't reach them. You can't reach anyone."

"You can't jam BrainPals," Jared said. BrainPals transmitted through a series of multiple, redundant and encrypted transmission streams, each communicating through a shifting pattern of frequencies, the pattern of which was generated through a onetime key created when one BrainPal contacted another. It was virtually impossible to block even one of these streams; blocking all would be unheard of.

Boutin walked over to the antenna and pressed it again; the cotton batting in Jared's head returned. "You were saying?" Boutin said. Jared held back the urge to scream. After a minute Boutin turned the antenna back on. "Normally, you are right," Boutin said. "I supervised the latest round of communication protocols in the BrainPal. I helped design them. And you're entirely correct. You can't jam the communication streams, not without using such a high-energy broadcasting source that you overwhelmed all possible transmissions, including your own.

"But I'm not jamming the BrainPals that way," Boutin said. "Do you know what a 'back door' is? It's an easy-access entrance that a programmer or designer leaves himself into a complex program or design, so he can get into the guts of what he's working on without jumping through hoops. I had a back door into the BrainPal that only opens with my verification signal. The back door was designed to let me monitor BrainPal function on the prototypes for this last iteration, but it also allowed me to do some tweaking of the capabilities to factor out certain functions when I saw a glitch. One of the things I can do is turn off transmission capabilities. It's not in the design, so someone who is not me wouldn't know it was there."

Boutin paused for a second and regarded Jared. "But *you* should have known about the back door," he said. "Maybe you wouldn't have thought to use it as a weapon—I didn't until I got here—but if you're me you should know this. What do you know? Really?"

"How do you know about me?" Jared asked, to derail Boutin. "You knew I was supposed to be you. How did you know?"

"That's actually an interesting story," Boutin said, taking Jared's bait. "When we decided to make the back door a weapon, I made the code for the weapon like the code for the back door, because it was the simplest thing to do. That meant that it has the ability to check the function status of the BrainPals it affected. This turned out to be useful for a lot of reasons; not the least was letting us know how many soldiers we were dealing with at one time. It also gave us snapshots of the consciousness of the individual soldiers. This also is turning out to be useful.

"You were very recently at Covell Station, were you not?" Jared said nothing. "Oh, come now," Boutin said, irritably. "I know you were there. Stop acting like you are giving away state secrets."

"Yes," Jared said. "I was at Covell."

"Thank you," Boutin said. "We know there are Colonial soldiers at Omagh and that they come into Covell Station; we've placed detection devices there that scan for the back door. But they never go off. Whatever soldiers you have there must have different BrainPal architecture." Boutin glanced over to see Jared's reaction to this; Jared gave none. Boutin continued. "However, *you* tripped our alarms

because you have the BrainPal I designed. Later on I got the consciousness signature sent to me, and as you might imagine I was floored. I know the image of my own consciousness very well, since I use my own pattern for a lot of testing. I let the Obin know I was looking for you. We were collecting Special Forces soldiers anyway, so this was not difficult for them to do. In fact, they should have tried to collect you at Covell."

"They tried to kill me at Covell," Jared said.

"Sorry," Boutin said. "Even the Obin can get a little excited in the thick of things. But you can take comfort in knowing that after that point they were told to scan first, shoot second."

"Thanks," Jared said. "That meant a lot to my squad mate today, when they shot him in the head."

"Sarcasm!" Boutin said. "That's more than most of your kind can manage. You got that from me. Like I said, they can get excitable. As well as telling them to look for you, I also told the Obin they could expect an attack here, because if one of you was running around with my consciousness, it was only a matter of time before you found your way here. You probably wouldn't risk a full-scale attack, but you'd probably try something sneaky, like you did. We were listening for this sort of attack, and we were listening for you. As soon as we had you on the ground, we threw the switch to disable the BrainPals."

Jared thought of the members of his platoon falling from the sky and felt sick. "You could have let them all land, you son of a bitch," Jared said. "When you blocked their BrainPals, they were defenseless. You know that."

"They're *not* defenseless," Boutin countered. "They can't use their Empees, but they can use their combat knives and their fighting skills. Ripping away your BrainPals causes most of you to go catatonic, but some of you still keep fighting. Look at you. Although you're probably better prepared than most. If you've got my memories, you know what it's like not to be connected all the time. Even so, six of you on the ground was more than enough. And we only needed you as it is."

"For what?" Jared asked.

"All in good time," Charles Boutin said.

"If you only need me, what are you going to do with my squad?" Jared asked.

"I could tell you, but I think you've deflected me long enough from my original question, don't you?" Boutin smiled. "I want to know what you know about me, and about *being* me, and about what you know of my plans here."

"Since I'm here, you already know we know about you," Jared said. "You're not a secret anymore."

"And let me just say that I'm very impressed about that," Boutin said. "I thought I had covered my tracks well. And I'm kicking myself for not formatting the storage device I stored that consciousness imprint on. I was in a rush to leave, you see. Even so, it's no excuse. It was stupid of me."

"I disagree," Jared said.

"I imagine you would," Boutin said. "Since without it you wouldn't be here, in many senses of the word *here*. I am impressed they were able to make a transfer back into a brain, however. Even I hadn't figured that out before I had to go. Who managed that?"

"Harry Wilson," Jared said.

"Harry!" Boutin said. "Nice guy. Didn't know he was that smart. He hid it well. Of course, I *did* do most of the work before he got to it. To get back to your point about the Colonial Union knowing I'm here, yes, it's a problem. But it's also an interesting opportunity. There are ways to make this work. Back to it, now, and let me cut short any further deflections by telling you that how you answer will help determine whether what remains of your squad lives or dies. Do you understand me?"

"I understand you," Jared said.

"Perfect," Boutin said. "Now, tell me what you know about me. How much do you know about my work?"

"Broad outlines," Jared said. "The details are difficult. I didn't have enough similar experiences to let those memories take root."

"Having similar experiences matters," Boutin said. "Interesting. And that would explain why you didn't know about the back door. How about my political views? What I felt about the Colonial Union and the CDF?"

"I'm guessing you don't like them," Jared said.

"That'd be a pretty good guess," Boutin said. "But that sounds like you don't have any first-hand knowledge of what I thought about any of that."

"No," Jared said.

"Because you don't have any experience with that sort of thing, do you?" Boutin said. "You're Special Forces, after all. They don't put questioning authority into your lesson plan. What about my personal experiences?"

"I remember most of it," Jared said. "I had enough experience for that."

"So you know about Zoë," Boutin mused.

Jared felt a flush of emotion at the child's name. "I know about her," he said, voice slightly husky.

Boutin picked up on it. "You *feel* it too," he said, coming up close to Jared. "Don't you? What I felt when they told me she was dead."

"I feel it," Jared said.

"You poor man," Boutin whispered. "To be made to feel that for a child you didn't know."

"I knew her," Jared said. "I knew her through you."

"I see that," Boutin said, and stepped away to a lab desk. "I'm sold, Jared," he said, regaining his composure and conversation. "You are sufficiently like me to officially be interesting."

"Does that mean you'll let my squad live?" Jared asked.

"For now," Boutin said. "You've been cooperative and they're fenced in by guns that will shred them into hamburger if they get within three meters of them, so there's no reason to kill them."

"And what about me?" Jared said.

"You, my friend, are going to get a complete and thorough brain scan," Boutin said, eyes to the desk, where he worked a keyboard. "In fact, I'm going to take a recording of your consciousness. I want to get a very close look at it indeed. I want to see how much like me you really are. It seems like you're missing a lot of detail, and you've got some Special Forces brainwashing to get over. But on the important things I'd guess we have a lot in common."

"We're different in one way I can think of," Jared said.

"Really," Boutin said. "Do tell."

"I wouldn't betray every human alive because my daughter died," Jared said.

Boutin looked at Jared, thoughtfully, for a minute. "You really think I'm doing this because Zoë was killed on Covell," Boutin finally said.

"I do," Jared said. "And I don't think this is the way to honor her memory."

"You don't, do you," Boutin said, and then turned back to the keyboard to jab at a button. Jared's crèche thrummed, and he felt something like a pinch in his brain.

"I'm recording your consciousness now," Boutin said. "Just relax." He left the room, closing the door behind him. Jared, feeling the pinching increase in his head, didn't relax one bit. He closed his eyes.

Several minutes later Jared heard the door open and close. He opened his eyes. Boutin had come back and was standing by the door. "How's that consciousness recording working for you?" he asked Jared.

"It hurts like hell," Jared said.

"There is that unfortunate side effect," Boutin said. "I'm not sure why it happens. I'll have to look into that."

"I'd appreciate that," Jared said, through gritted teeth.

Boutin smiled. "More sarcasm," he said. "But I've brought you something that I think will ease your pain."

"Whatever it is, give me two of them," Jared said.

"I think one will be enough," Boutin said, and opened the door to show Zoë in the doorway.

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THIRTEEN

Boutin was right. Jared's pain went away.

"Sweetheart," Boutin said to Zoë, "I'd like to introduce you to a friend of mine. This is Jared. Say hello to him, please."

"Hello, Mr. Jared," said Zoë, in a small, uncertain voice.

"Hi," Jared said, hardly risking saying any more because he felt like his voice could break and shatter. He collected himself. "Hello, Zoë. It's good to see you."

"You don't remember Jared, Zoë," Boutin said. "But he remembers you. He knew you from back when we were on Phoenix."

"Does he know Mommy?" Zoë asked.

"I believe he did know Mommy," Boutin said. "As well as anyone did."

"Why is he in that box?" Zoë asked.

"He's just helping Daddy with a little experiment, that's all," Boutin said.

"Can he come over to play when he's done?" Zoë said.

"We'll see," Boutin said. "Why don't you say good-bye to him for now, honey. He and Daddy have a lot of work to do."

Zoë turned her attention back to Jared. "Good-bye, Mr. Jared," she said, and walked out of the doorway, presumably back to where she came from. Jared strained to watch her and hear her footfalls. Then Boutin closed the door.

"You understand that you're not going to be able to come over and play," Boutin said. "It's just that Zoë gets lonely here. I got the Obin to

put a little receiver satellite in orbit over one of the smaller colonies to pirate their entertainment feeds to keep her amused, so she's not missing out on the joys of Colonial Union educational programming. But there's no one here for her to play with. She has an Obin nanny, but it mostly makes sure she doesn't fall down any stairs. It's just me and her."

"Tell me," Jared said. "Tell me how she can possibly be alive. The Obin killed everyone at Covell."

"The Obin *saved* Zoë," Boutin said. "It was the Rraey who attacked Covell and Omagh, not the Obin. The Rraey did it to get back at the Colonial Union for their defeat at Coral. They didn't even actually *want* Omagh. They just picked a soft target to attack. The Obin found out about their plans and timed their arrival for just after the first phase of the attack, when the Rraey would still be weak from their fight with the humans. Once they pried the Rraey off Covell, they went through the station and found the civilians jammed into a meeting room. They were being held there. The Rraey killed all the military staff and scientists because their bodies are improved too much to make for good eating. But the colonist staff—well, they were just fine. If the Obin hadn't attacked when they did, the Rraey would have slaughtered and eaten them all."

"Where are the rest of the civilians?" Jared asked.

"Well, the Obin killed them, of course," Boutin said. "You know the Obin don't usually take prisoners."

"But they saved Zoë, you said," Jared said.

Boutin smiled. "While they were going through the station, the Obin did a tour of the science labs to see if there were any ideas worth stealing," he said. "They're excellent scientists, but they're not very creative. They can improve on ideas and technology they find from other places, but they're not very good at originating the technology themselves. The science station is one of the main reasons they were interested in Omagh at all. They found my work on consciousness, and they were interested. They found out I wasn't on the station, but that Zoë was. So they kept her while they were looking for me."

"They used her as blackmail," Jared said.

"No," Boutin said. "More as a goodwill gesture. And I was the one who demanded things from them."

"They held Zoë, and you demanded things from *them,*" Jared said.

"That's right," Boutin said.

"Like what?" Jared asked.

"Like this war," Boutin said.

Jane Sagan edged closer to the eighth and final gun emplacement. Like the others it tracked her and then warned her the closer she got to it. As near as she could tell if she got closer than about three meters, the gun would fire. Sagan picked up a rock and threw it directly at the gun; the rock struck and bounced off harmlessly, the gun's systems tracking but otherwise ignoring the projectile. The gun could differentiate between a rock and a human. *That's some fine engineering,* Sagan thought, not very charitably.

She found a larger rock, stepped up to the edge of the safe zone, and chucked it to the right of the gun. It tracked the rock; farther to her right another gun trained on her. The guns shared targeting information; she wasn't going to get past them by distracting one of them.

The bowl they were in was shallow enough that Sagan could see over the lip; as far as she could see there weren't any Obin soldiers in the area. Either they were hiding or they were confident the humans weren't going anywhere.

"Yes!"

Sagan turned and saw Daniel Harvey coming toward her with something squirmy in his hand. "Look who's got dinner," he said.

"What is that?" Sagan asked.

"The hell if I know," Harvey said. "I saw it slithering out of the ground and caught it before it went back in. Put up a fight, though. I had to grab its head to keep it from biting me. I figure we can eat it."

By this time Seaborg had limped over to look at the creature. "I'm not eating that," he said.

"Fine," Harvey said. "You starve. The lieutenant and I will eat it."

"We can't eat it," Sagan said. "The animals here aren't compatible with our food needs. You might as well eat rocks."

Harvey looked at Sagan as if she had just taken a dump on his head. "Fine," he said, and bent down to let the thing go.

"Wait," Sagan said. "I want you to throw that."

"What?" Harvey said.

"Throw that thing at the gun," Sagan said. "I want to see what the guns will do to something living."

"That's kind of cruel," Harvey said.

"A minute ago, you were thinking about eating the damn thing," Seaborg said, "and *now* you're worried about cruelty to animals?"

"Shut up," Harvey said. He cocked his arm back to throw the animal.

"Harvey," Sagan said. "Don't throw it directly at the gun, please."

Harvey suddenly realized that the trajectory of the projectiles would lead directly back to his body. "Sorry," he said. "Stupid of me."

"Throw it up," Sagan said. "Way up." Harvey shrugged and launched the thing high into the air, in an arc that took the thing away from the three of them. The creature writhed in midair. The gun tracked the creature as far up as it could, roughly fifty degrees up. It rotated and shot the thing apart as soon as it came back into its range, shredding it with a spray of thin needles that expanded on contact with the poor creature's flesh. In less than a second there was nothing left of the thing but mist and a few chunks falling to the ground.

"Very nice," Harvey said. "Now we know the guns really work. And I'm still hungry."

"That's very interesting," Sagan said.

"That I'm hungry?" Harvey said.

"No, Harvey," Sagan said, irritated. "I don't actually give a damn about your stomach right now. What's interesting is that the guns can only target up to a certain angle. They're ground suppression."

"So?" Harvey said. "We're on the ground."

"Trees," Seaborg said, suddenly. "Son of a bitch."

"What are you thinking, Seaborg?" Sagan asked.

"In training, Dirac and I won a war game by sneaking up on the opposing side in the trees," he said. "They were expecting us to attack

from the ground. They never bothered looking up until we got right up on them. Then I almost fell out of the tree and nearly got myself killed. But the *idea* worked."

The three of them turned to look at the trees inside their perimeter. They weren't real trees, but the Aristian equivalent: large spindly plants that reached meters high into the sky.

"Tell me we're all having the same bugshit crazy thought," Harvey said. "I'd hate to think it was just me."

"Come on," Sagan said. "Let's see what we can do with this."

"That's insane," Jared said. "The Obin wouldn't start a war just because you asked them to."

"Really?" Boutin said. A sneer crept onto his face. "And you know this from your vast, personal knowledge of the Obin? Your years of study on the matter? You wrote your doctoral thesis on the Obin?"

"No species would go to war just because you asked them to," Jared said. "The Obin don't do anything for anyone else."

"And they're not now," Boutin said. "The war is a means to an end—they want what I can offer them."

"And what is that?" Jared asked.

"I can give them souls," Boutin said.

"I don't understand," Jared said.

"It's because you don't know the Obin," Boutin said. "The Obin are a created race—the Consu made them just to see what would happen. But despite rumors to the contrary, the Consu aren't perfect. They make mistakes. And they made a huge mistake when they made the Obin. They gave the Obin intelligence, but what they couldn't do—what they didn't have the capability of doing—was to give the Obin *consciousness*."

"The Obin are conscious," Jared said. "They have a society. They communicate. They remember. They *think*."

"So what?" Boutin said. "Termites have societies. Every species communicates. You don't have to be intelligent to remember—you have a computer in your head that remembers everything you ever do, and it's fundamentally no more intelligent than a rock. And as for

thinking, what about thinking requires you to observe yourself doing it? Not a goddamned thing. You can create an entire starfaring race that has no more self-introspection than a protozoan, and the Obin are the living proof of that. The Obin are aware *collectively* that they exist. But not one of them *individually* has anything that you would recognize as a personality. No ego. No 'I.'"

"That doesn't make any sense," Jared said.

"Why not?" Boutin said. "What are the trappings of self-awareness? And do the Obin have it? The Obin have no *art*, Dirac. They have no music or literature or visual arts. They comprehend the concept of art intellectually but they have no way to appreciate it. The only time they communicate is to tell each other factual things: where they're going, or what's over that hill or how many people they need to kill. They *can't* lie. They have no moral inhibition against it—they don't actually have any real moral inhibitions against anything—but they can no more formulate a lie than you or I could levitate an object with our mind power. Our brains aren't wired that way; their brains aren't wired that way. Everybody lies. Everybody who is conscious, who has a self-image to maintain. But they don't. They're perfect."

"Being ignorant of your own existence is not what I'd call 'perfect,'" Jared said.

"They *are* perfect," Boutin insisted. "They don't lie. They cooperate perfectly with each other, within the structure of their society. Challenges or disagreements are dealt with in a prescribed manner. They don't backstab. They are perfectly moral because their morals are absolute—hardcoded. They have no vanity and no ambition. They don't even have sexual vanity. They're all hermaphrodites, and pass their genetic information to each other as casually as you or I would shake hands. And they have no fear."

"Every creature has fear," Jared said. "Even the non-conscious ones."

"No," Boutin said. "Every creature has a survival instinct. It looks like fear but it's not the same thing. Fear isn't the desire to avoid death or pain. Fear is rooted in the knowledge that what you recognize as yourself can cease to exist. Fear is existential. The Obin are not existential in the slightest. That's why they don't surrender. It's why

they don't take prisoners. It's why the Colonial Union fears them, you know. Because they can't be made afraid. What an advantage that is! It's so much of an advantage that if I'm ever in charge of creating human soldiers again, I'm going to suggest stripping out their consciousness."

Jared shuddered. Boutin noted it. "Come now, Dirac," Boutin said. "You can't tell me that awareness has been a *happy* thing for you. Aware that you've been created for a purpose other than your own existence. Aware of memories of someone else's life. Aware that your purpose is nothing more than to kill the people and things the Colonial Union points you at. You're a gun with an ego. You'd be better off without the ego."

"Horseshit," Jared said.

Boutin smiled. "Well, fair enough," he said. "I can't say I'd want to be without self-awareness, either. And since you're supposed to be me I can't say that I'm surprised you feel the same way."

"If the Obin are perfect I don't see why they would need you," Jared said.

"Because they don't see themselves as perfect, of course," Boutin said. "They know they lack consciousness, and while individually it might not matter much to them, as a species, it matters a great deal. They saw my work on consciousness—mostly on consciousness transference but also my early notes on recording and storing consciousness entirely. They desired what they thought I could give them. Greatly."

"Have you given them consciousness?" Jared asked.

"Not yet," Boutin said. "But I'm getting close. Close enough to make them desire it even more."

"'Desire,'" Jared repeated. "A strong emotion for a species who lacks sentience."

"Do you know what *Obin* means?" Boutin asked. "What the actual word means in the Obin language, when it's not being used to refer to the Obin as a species."

"No," Jared said.

"It means *lacking,*" Boutin said, and cocked his head, bemusedly. "Isn't that interesting? With most intelligent species, if you look back far enough for the etymological roots of what they call themselves,

you'll come up with some variation or another of *the people.* Because every species starts off on their own little home world, convinced they are the absolute center of the universe. Not the Obin. They knew right from the beginning what they were, and the word they used to describe themselves showed they knew that they were missing something every other intelligent species had. They *lacked* consciousness. It's just about the only truly *descriptive* noun they have. Well, that and *Obinur,* which means *home of those who lack*. Everything else is just dry as dust. *Arist* means *third moon*. But *Obin* is remarkable. Imagine if every species named itself after its greatest flaw. We could name our species *arrogance*."

"Why would knowing they lack consciousness matter to them?" Jared asked.

"Why did knowing that she couldn't eat from the tree of knowledge matter to Eve?" Boutin said. "It shouldn't have mattered but it did. She was temptable—which, if you believe in an all-powerful God, means God intentionally put temptation into Eve. Which seems like a dirty trick, if you ask me. There's no reason the Obin should desire sentience. It'll do them no good. But they want it anyway. I think it's possible that the Consu, rather than screwing up and creating an intelligence without ego, intentionally created the Obin that way, and then programmed them with the desire for the one thing they could not have."

"But why?"

"Why do the Consu do anything?" Boutin said. "When you're the most advanced species around, you don't have to explain yourselves to the rock bangers, which would be us. For our purposes, they might as well be gods. And the Obin are the poor, insensate Adams and Eves."

"So this makes you the snake," Jared said.

Boutin smiled at the backhanded reference. "Maybe so," he said. "And maybe by giving the Obin what they want, I'll force them out of their egoless paradise. They can deal with that. In the meantime, I'll get what I want from this. I'll get my war, and I'll get the end of the Colonial Union."

The "tree" the three of them looked at stood about ten meters high and was about a meter in diameter. The trunk was covered with ridges; in a rainfall these could funnel water into the inner part of the tree. Every three meters, larger ridges sprouted a circular array of vines and delicate branches, decreasing in circumference as they increased in altitude. Sagan, Seaborg and Harvey watched as the tree swayed in the breeze.

"It's a pretty light breeze to make the tree sway this much," Sagan said.

"The wind's probably faster up there," Harvey said.

"Not by that much," Sagan said. "If at all. It's only ten meters up."

"Maybe it's hollow," Seaborg said. "Like the trees on Phoenix. When Dirac and I were doing our thing, we had to be careful which of the Phoenix trees we walked across. Some of the smaller ones wouldn't have supported our weight."

Sagan nodded. She approached the tree and put weight on one of the smaller ridges. It held for a reasonable amount of time before she could snap it off. She looked up at the tree again, thinking.

"Going for a climb, Lieutenant?" Harvey asked. Sagan didn't answer; she gripped the ridges on the tree and hoisted herself up, taking care to distribute her weight as evenly as possible so as not to put too much strain on any one ridge. About two-thirds of the way up, with the trunk beginning to taper, she felt the tree begin to bend. Her weight was pulling down the trunk. Three-quarters of the way up, and the tree was significantly bent. Sagan listened for the sounds of the tree snapping or cracking, but heard nothing except the rustle of the tree ridges scraping against each other. These trees were immensely flexible; Sagan suspected that they saw a lot of wind as Arist's global ocean generated immense hurricanes that lashed over the planet's relatively tiny island continents.

"Harvey," Sagan said, moving slightly back and forth to keep the tree balanced. "Tell me if the tree looks like it's going to snap."

"The base of the trunk looks fine," Harvey said.

Sagan looked over to the nearest gun. "How far do you think it is to that gun?" she said.

Harvey figured out where she was going with that. "Not nearly far enough for you to do what you're thinking of doing, Lieutenant."

Sagan wasn't so sure about that. "Harvey," she said. "Go get Wigner."

"What?" Harvey said.

"Bring Wigner here," Sagan said. "I want to try something." Harvey gawked in disbelief for a moment, and then stomped off to get Wigner. Sagan looked down at Seaborg. "How are you holding up?" she asked.

"My leg hurts," Seaborg said. "And my head hurts. I keep feeling like I'm missing something."

"It's the integration," Sagan said. "It's hard to focus without it."

"I'm focusing fine," Seaborg said. "It's just that I'm focusing on how much I'm missing."

"You'll make it," Sagan said. Seaborg grunted.

A few minutes later Harvey appeared with Wigner's body in a fireman's carry. "Let me guess," Harvey said. "You want me to deliver him to you."

"Yes, please," Sagan said.

"Sure, hell, why not?" Harvey said. "Nothing like climbing a tree while you've got a dead body over your shoulder."

"You can do it," Seaborg said.

"As long as people don't distract me," Harvey growled. He shifted Wigner and began to climb, adding his weight and Wigner's to the tree. The tree creaked and dipped considerably, causing Harvey to inch along to keep his balance and to keep from losing Wigner. By the time he got to Sagan, the trunk was bent at nearly a ninety-degree angle.

"What now?" Harvey said.

"Can you put him between us?" Sagan said. Harvey grunted, carefully slid Wigner off his shoulder, and positioned his body so it was prone on the tree. He looked up at Sagan. "Just for the record, this is a pretty fucked-up way for him to go," Harvey said.

"He's helping us," Sagan said. "There are worse things." She carefully swung her leg over the trunk of the tree. Harvey did the same in the other direction. "Count of three," Sagan said, and when she reached *three* they both jumped out of the tree, five meters to the ground.

Relieved of the weight of two humans, the tree snapped back toward perpendicular and then beyond it, flinging Wigner's corpse off the trunk and arcing it toward the guns. It was not an entirely successful launch; Wigner slipped down the trunk just prior to launch, compromising the total energy available and positioning him off-center just before he became airborne. Wigner's arc dropped him directly in front of the closest gun, which pulverized him instantly as soon as he fell into firing range. He dropped as a pile of meat and entrails.

"Christ," Seaborg said.

Sagan turned to Seaborg. "Can you climb with that leg?" she asked.

"I *can,*" Seaborg said. "But I'm not in a rush to get all shot up like that."

"You won't," Sagan said. "I'll go."

"You just saw what happened to Wigner, right?" Harvey asked.

"I saw," Sagan said. "He was a corpse and he had no control over his flight. He also weighs more, and it was you and me in the tree. I'm lighter, I'm alive and the two of you mass more. I should be able to clear the gun."

"If you're wrong, you'll be pâté," Harvey said.

"At least it'll be quick," Sagan said.

"Yes," Harvey said. "But messy."

"Look, you'll have plenty of time to criticize me when I'm dead," Sagan said. "For now, I'd just like all of us to get up this tree."

A few minutes later Seaborg and Harvey were on either side of Sagan, who was crouched and balancing on the bent trunk.

"Any last words?" Harvey said.

"I've always thought you were a real pain in the ass, Harvey," Sagan said.

Harvey smiled. "I love you too, Lieutenant." He nodded to Seaborg. "Now," he said. They dropped.

The tree whipped up; Sagan adjusted and fought against the acceleration to keep her position. When the tree reached the apex of its swing Sagan kicked off, adding her own force to the force of the tree launch. Sagan arced impossibly high, it seemed to her, easily clearing the guns, which tracked her but could not fire. The guns followed her until she was beyond the perimeter and rapidly arcing toward the

meadow beyond. She had time to think, *This is going to hurt* before she balled up and plowed into the ground. Her unitard stiffened, absorbing some of the impact, but Sagan felt at least one rib crack from the hit. The stiffened unitard caused her to roll farther than she would have otherwise. She eventually came to a stop and, lying in the tall grass, tried to remember how to breathe. It took a few more minutes than she expected.

In the distance, Sagan heard Harvey and Seaborg calling for her. She also heard a low drone from the other direction, growing higher in pitch the longer she listened. Still lying in the tall grass, she shifted her position and tried to see over it.

A pair of Obin were coming, riding a small armed craft. They were coming right toward her.

"The first thing you have to understand is that the Colonial Union is evil," Boutin said to Jared.

Jared's headache had returned with a vengeance, and he longed to see Zoë again. "I don't see it," he said.

"Well, why would you," Boutin said. "You're a couple years old at most. And all your life has been made up of doing what someone else has told you to do. You've hardly made choices of your own, now, have you."

"I've had this lecture already," Jared said, recalling Cainen.

"From someone in Special Forces?" Boutin asked, genuinely surprised.

"From a Rraey prisoner," Jared said. "Named Cainen. Says he met you once."

Boutin furrowed his brow. "The name isn't familiar," he said. "But then I've met quite a few Rraey and Eneshans recently. They all tend to blur. But it makes sense a Rraey would tell you this. They find the whole Special Forces setup morally appalling."

"Yes, I know," Jared said. "He told me I was a slave."

"You *are* a slave!" Boutin said, excitedly. "Or an indentured servant, at the very least, bound to a term of service over which you have no control. Yes, they make you feel good about it by suggesting you were

born specially to save humanity, and by chaining you to your platoon mates through integration. But when it comes right down to it, those are just ways they use to control you. You're a year old, maybe two. What do you know about the universe anyway? You know what they've told you—that it's a hostile place and that we are always under attack. But what would you say if I told you that everything the Colonial Union told you was wrong?"

"It's not wrong," Jared said. "It *is* hostile. I've seen enough combat to know that."

"But all you've seen *is* combat," Boutin said. "You've never been out where you weren't killing whatever the Colonial Union tells you to. And it's certainly true that the universe is hostile to the Colonial Union. And the reason for that is, *the Colonial Union is hostile to the universe*. In all the time humanity has been out in the universe we've never not been at war with nearly every other species we've come across. There are a few here or there the Colonial Union deems useful as allies or trade partners but so few as to have their numbers be insignificant. We know of six hundred and three intelligent species inside the Colonial Union's Skip horizon, Dirac. Do you know how many the CU classifies as a threat, meaning the CDF is able to preemptively attack at will? Five hundred and seventy-seven. When you're actively hostile toward ninety-six percent of all the intelligent races you know about, that's not just stupid. It's racial suicide."

"Other species are at war with each other," Jared said. "It's not just the Colonial Union that goes to war."

"Yes," Boutin said. "Every species has other species it competes with and goes to war against. But other species don't try to fight *every other species* they come across. The Rraey and the Enesha were longtime enemies before we allied them, and who knows, maybe they will be again. But neither of those species classifies *all* the other races as a permanent threat. *Nobody* does that but the Colonial Union. Have you heard of the Conclave, Dirac?"

"No," Jared said.

"The Conclave is a great meeting between hundreds of species in this part of the galaxy," Boutin said. "It convened more than twenty years ago to try to create a workable framework of government for the

entire region. It would help stop the fighting for real estate by apportioning new colonies in a systematic way, rather than having every species run for the prize and try to beat off whoever tries to take it away. It would enforce the system with a multispecies military command that would attack anyone who tried to take a colony by force. Not every species has signed on to the Conclave, but only two species have refused even to send representatives. One is the Consu, because why would they. The other is the Colonial Union."

"You expect me to take your word for that," Jared said.

"I don't expect anything from you," Boutin said. "You don't know about it. The rank-and-file CDF doesn't know about it. The colonials certainly don't know about it. The Colonial Union has all the spaceships, Skip drones and communication satellites. It handles all the trade and what little diplomacy we engage in on its space stations. The Colonial Union is the bottleneck through which all information flows, and it decides what the colonies learn and what they don't. And not just the colonies, it's Earth too. Hell, Earth is the worst."

"Why?" Jared asked.

"Because it's been kept socially retarded for two hundred years," Boutin said. "The Colonial Union *farms* people there, Dirac. Uses the rich countries there for its military. Uses the poor countries for its colonial seed stock. And it likes the arrangement so much that the Colonial Union actively suppresses the natural evolution of society there. They don't *want* it to change. That would mess up their production of soldiers and colonists. So they sealed Earth off from the rest of humanity to keep the people there from knowing just how perfectly they're being held in stasis. Manufactured a disease—they called it the Crimp—and told the people on Earth it was an alien infection. Used it as an excuse to quarantine the planet. They let it flare up every generation or two just to maintain the pretense."

"I've met people from Earth," Jared said, thinking of Lieutenant Cloud. "They're not stupid. They would know if they were being held back."

"Oh, the Colonial Union will allow an innovation or two every couple of years to make them think they're still on a growth curve, but it's never anything *useful,*" Boutin said. "A new computer here. A

music player there. An organ transplant technique. They're allowed the occasional land war to keep things interesting. Meanwhile, they have all the same social and political structures they had two hundred years earlier, and they think it's because they've reached a point of genuine stability. And they still die of old age at seventy-five! It's ridiculous. The Colonial Union has managed Earth so well it doesn't even *know* it's being managed. It's in the dark. All the colonies are in the dark. Nobody knows anything."

"Except you," Jared said.

"I was building the soldiers, Dirac," Boutin said. "They had to let me know what was going on. I had top-secret clearance right until the moment I shot that clone of mine. That's why I know the Conclave is out there. And that's why I know if the Colonial Union isn't killed, humanity's going to get wiped out."

"We seem to have held our own up to this point," Jared said.

"That's because the Colonial Union takes advantage of chaos," Boutin said. "When the Conclave ratifies its agreement—and it will in the next year or two—the Colonial Union won't be able to found colonies anymore. The Conclave's military force will kick them off any planet they try to take. They won't be able to take over anyone's colonies, either. We'll be bottled up, and when another race decides to take one of our worlds, who will stop them? The Conclave won't protect races that won't participate. Slowly but surely we'll be whittled back to one world again. If we're left with that."

"Unless we have a war," Jared said, not hiding his skepticism.

"That's right," Boutin said. "The problem isn't humanity. It's the Colonial Union. Get rid of the Colonial Union, replace it with a government that actually helps its people instead of farming them and keeping them ignorant for its own purposes, and join with the Conclave to get a reasonable share of new colonial worlds."

"With you in charge, I presume," Jared said.

"Until we get things organized, yes," Boutin said.

"Minus the worlds that the Rraey and the Enesha, your allies in this adventure, take for their own," Jared said.

"The Rraey and the Enesha weren't going to fight for free," Boutin said.

"And the Obin taking Earth," Jared said.

"That's for me," Boutin said. "Personal request."

"Must be nice," Jared said.

"You continue to underestimate how badly the Obin want consciousness," Boutin said.

"I liked this better when I thought you were just trying to get revenge for Zoë," Jared said.

Boutin reared back, as if he'd been slapped. Then he leaned in close. "You know what the thought of losing Zoë did to me," Boutin hissed. "You *know* it. But let me tell you something that you don't seem to know. After we took back Coral from the Rraey, the CDF Military Intelligence office predicted the Rraey would make a counterattack and listed the five most likely targets. Omagh and Covell Station were right at the top of that list. And you know what the CDF did about it?"

"No," Jared said.

"Not a goddamn thing," Boutin spat the words. "And the reason for that was that the CDF was spread thin in the aftermath of Coral, and some general decided what he really wanted to do was try to grab a colony world from the Robu. In other words, it was more important to go after some new real estate than to defend what we already had. They *knew* the attack was coming, and they did nothing. And until the Obin contacted me, all I knew was that the reason my daughter died was because the Colonial Union didn't do what it's supposed to do: keep safe the lives of those in its protection. To keep safe my daughter. Trust me, Dirac. This has *everything* to do with Zoë."

"And what if your war doesn't go the way you want it to?" Jared asked, softly. "The Obin are still going to want their consciousness, and they'll have nothing to give you."

Boutin smiled. "You're alluding to the fact that we've actually lost the Rraey and the Eneshans as allies," he said. Jared tried to hide his surprise and failed. "Yes, of course we know about that. And I have to admit it worried me for a while. But now we have something that I think puts us back on track and will allow the Obin to take on the Colonial Union by itself."

"I don't imagine you'll tell me what that is," Jared said.

"I'll be happy to tell you," Boutin said. "It's you."

Sagan scrabbled on the ground, looking for something to fight with. Her fingers wrapped around something that seemed solid, and she pulled at it. She came up with a clod of dirt.

Aw, fuck it, she thought, and then sprang up and flung it at the hovercraft as it went past. The clod connected with the head of the second Obin, sitting behind the first. It tilted in surprise and fell off its saddle seat, tumbling to the ground.

Sagan bolted from her place in the grass and was on the Obin in an instant. The dazed creature tried to raise its weapon at Sagan; she stepped to the side, yanked it out of its hand, and clubbed the Obin with it. The Obin screeched and stayed down.

In the distance the hovercraft was wheeling around and looking to make a run at Sagan. Sagan examined the weapon in her hand, trying to see if she could make sense of the thing before the hovercraft came back her way, and decided not to bother. She grabbed the Obin, punched it in the neck to keep it subdued, and searched it for an edged weapon. She found something like a combat knife hanging from its waist. Its shape and balance was all wrong for a human hand but there was nothing she could do about that now.

The hovercraft had now turned around completely and was bearing down on Sagan. She could see the barrel of its gun spinning up to fire. Sagan reached down, and with the knife still in hand grabbed the fallen Obin and with a grunt heaved it into the path of the hovercraft and its gun. The Obin danced as the fléchettes sliced into it. Sagan, covered by the dancing Obin, stepped to the side but as close as she dared to the craft and swung the knife as the Obin flashed by. She felt a shocking wrenching of her arm and was spun hard into the ground as the knife connected with the Obin's body. She stayed down, dazed and in pain, for several minutes.

When she finally got up she saw the hovercraft idling a hundred meters away. The Obin was still sitting on it, its dangling head held on to the neck by a flap of skin. Sagan pushed the Obin off the hovercraft and stripped it of its weapons and supplies. She then wiped the Obin's blood off the hovercraft as best she could and took a few minutes to learn how the machine worked. Then she turned the thing around and

flew it toward the fence. The hovercraft crested the guns easily; Sagan set it down out of their range, in front of Harvey and Seaborg.

"You look terrible," Harvey said.

"I feel terrible," Sagan said. "Now, would you like a ride out of here, or would you like to make some more small talk?"

"That depends," Harvey said. "Where are we going?"

"We had a mission," Sagan said. "I think we should finish it."

"Sure," Harvey said. "The three of us with no weapons, taking on at least several dozen Obin soldiers and attacking a science station."

Sagan hauled up the Obin weapon and handed it to Harvey. "Now you have a weapon," she said. "All you have to do is learn to use it."

"Swell," Harvey said, taking the weapon.

"How long do you think until the Obin realize one of their hovercraft is missing?" asked Seaborg.

"No time at all," Sagan said. "Come on. It's time to get moving."

"Looks like your recording is done," Boutin said to Jared, and turned to his desk display. Jared knew it before Boutin said it because the vise-like pinching had stopped mere instants ago.

"What do you mean that I'm the thing to get you back on track against the Colonial Union?" Jared said. "I'm not going to help you."

"Why not?" Boutin said. "You're not interested in saving the human race from a slow asphyxiation?"

"Let's just say your presentation does not leave me entirely convinced," Jared said.

Boutin shrugged. "So it goes," he said. "Naturally, you being me, or some facsimile thereof, I would have hoped you'd come around to my way of thinking. But in the end, no matter how many of my memories or personal tics you may have, you're still someone else, aren't you? Or are for now, anyway."

"What does that mean?" Jared said.

"I'll get to that," Boutin said. "But let me tell you a story first. It will make some things clear. Many years ago, the Obin and a race called the Ala got into a go-around over some real estate. On the surface, the Ala and the Obin were well-matched militarily, but the Alaite army

consisted of clones. This meant they were all susceptible to the same genetic weapon, a virus the Obin designed that would lie dormant for a while—long enough to be transmitted—and then dissolve the flesh of whatever poor Ala it was living in. The Alaite army was wiped out, and then so were the Ala."

"That's a lovely story," Jared said.

"Just wait, because it gets better," Boutin said. "Not too long ago, I thought about doing the same sort of thing to the Colonial Defense Forces. But doing that is more complicated than it sounds. For one thing, Colonial Defense Forces military bodies are almost entirely immune from disease—the SmartBlood simply won't tolerate pathogens. And of course neither the CDF or Special Forces bodies are actually cloned bodies, so even if we could infect them, they wouldn't all react in the same way. But then I realized there was one thing in each CDF body that was exactly the same. Something I knew my way around intimately."

"The BrainPal," Jared said.

"The BrainPal," Boutin said. "And for it, I could create a time-release virus of its own—one that would embed itself in the BrainPal, replicate every time one CDF member communicated with another, but would stay dormant until a date and time of my choosing. Then it would cause every body system regulated by the BrainPal to go haywire. Everyone with a BrainPal instantly dead, and all the human worlds open for conquest. Quick, easy, painless.

"But there was a problem. I had no way to get the virus in. My back door was for diagnostics only. I could read out and shut down certain systems, but it wasn't designed to upload code. In order to upload the code I would need someone to accept it for me and act as a carrier. So the Obin went looking for volunteers."

"The Special Forces ships," Jared said.

"We figured the Special Forces would be more vulnerable to their BrainPals locking up. All of you have never been without it, whereas regular CDF would still be able to function. And it turned out to be correct. You eventually recover, but the initial shock gave us lots of time to work with. We brought them here and tried to convince them

to be carriers. First we asked, and then we insisted. Not one cracked. That's discipline."

"Where are they now?" Jared asked.

"They're dead," Boutin said. "The way the Obin insist is pretty forceful. I should amend that, though. Some of them survived and I've been using them for consciousness studies. They're alive, as much as brains in a jar can be."

Jared felt sick. "Fuck you, Boutin," he said.

"They should have volunteered," Boutin said.

"I'm glad they disappointed you," Jared said. "I'll be doing the same."

"I don't think so," Boutin said. "What makes you different, Dirac, is that none of them had my brain and my consciousness already in their heads. And *you* do."

"Even with both, I'm not you," Jared said. "You said it yourself."

"I said you're someone else for now," Boutin said. "I don't suppose you know what would happen to you if I transferred the consciousness that's in here"—Boutin tapped his temple—"and put it in your head, do you?"

Jared remembered his conversation with Cainen and Harry Wilson, when they suggested overlaying the recorded Boutin consciousness upon his own, and felt himself go cold. "It'll wipe out the consciousness that's already there."

"Yes," Boutin said.

"You'll kill me," Jared said.

"Well, yes," Boutin said. "But I did just make a recording of your consciousness, because I need to fine-tune my own transfer. It's everything you are as of five minutes ago. So you'll only be mostly dead."

"You son of a bitch," Jared said.

"And when I've uploaded my consciousness into your body, I'll serve as the carrier for the virus. It won't affect me, of course. But everyone else will get its full strength. Then I'll have your squad mates shot, and then Zoë and I will head back to Colonial Union space in that capture pod you've so thoughtfully provided. I'll tell them that Charles Boutin is dead, and the Obin will lie low until the BrainPal virus

strikes. Then they'll move in and force the Colonial Union to surrender. And just like that, you and I will have saved humanity."

"Don't put this on me," Jared said. "I have nothing to do with this."

"Don't you?" Boutin said, amused. "Listen, Dirac. The Colonial Union is not going to see me as the instrument of its demise. I'll already be dead. They're going to see you, and you alone. Oh, you'll be a part of this, my friend. You don't have a choice."

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FOURTEEN

"The more I think about this plan the less I like it," Harvey said to Sagan. They and Seaborg crouched at the line of the forest edging the science station.

"Try not to think so much," Sagan said.

"That should be easy for you, Harvey," Seaborg said. He was trying to lighten the mood and doing a poor job of it.

Sagan glanced down at Seaborg's leg. "Are you going to be able to do this?" she asked. "Your limp's gotten worse."

"I'll be fine," Seaborg said. "I'm not going to sit here like a turd while you two are completing the mission."

"I'm not saying that," Sagan said. "I'm saying that you and Harvey could switch roles."

"I'm fine," Seaborg repeated. "And anyway, Harvey would kill me if I took his gig."

"Goddamn right," Harvey said. "This shit is what I'm good at."

"My leg hurts, but I can walk on it and run on it," Seaborg said. "I'll be fine. But let's not just sit here and talk about this anymore. My leg's going to tighten up."

Sagan nodded and turned her gaze back to the science station, which was a rather modest collection of buildings. On the north end of the compound were the Obin barracks, which were surprisingly compact; the Obin either did not want or need anything approaching privacy. Like humans the Obin collected together at mealtimes; many of them would be in the mess hall adjacent to the barracks. Harvey's

job was to create a distraction there and draw attention to himself, leading the Obin in other parts of the station toward him.

On the south end of the compound was the energy generator/regulator, housed in a large, shed-like building. The Obin used what were essentially huge batteries, which were constantly charged by windmills placed at a distance from the station. Seaborg's job was to cut the power, somehow. He'd have to work with what he found there to make it happen.

Between the two was the science station proper. After the power dropped, Sagan would enter, find Boutin and extract him, pounding him unconscious if need be to get him to the capture pod. If she came across Dirac, she would need to make a quick determination whether he was useful or if he had gone traitor like his progenitor. If it was the latter, she would have to kill him, clean and quick.

Sagan suspected she was going to have to kill Dirac no matter what; she didn't really think she would have enough time to decide whether he was trustworthy or not, and she didn't have her BrainPal upgrade to read his thoughts on the matter. Sagan allowed herself a moment of mirthless amusement at the fact that her mind-reading ability, so secret and classified, was also completely useless to her when she really needed it. Sagan didn't want to have to kill Dirac, but she didn't see that she had a whole lot of options in the matter. *Maybe he's already dead,* Sagan thought. *That would save me the trouble*.

Sagan shook the thought out of her head. She didn't like what that particular line of thought was saying about her. She would worry about Dirac when and if Dirac showed up. In the meantime, the three of them had other things to worry about. In the end, what really mattered was getting Boutin to that capture pod.

We do have one advantage, Sagan thought. *None of us really expects we're going to survive. That gives us options*.

"Are we ready?" Sagan asked.

"We're ready," Seaborg said.

"Fuck, yes," Harvey said.

"Let's do it then," Sagan said. "Harvey, you're on."

Jared woke from a brief nap to find Zoë staring up at him. He smiled. "Hello, Zoë," he said.

"Hello," Zoë said, and frowned. "I forgot your name," she said.

"I'm Jared," he said.

"Oh, yeah," Zoë said. "Hello, Mr. Jared."

"Hello, sweetie," Jared said, and once again he found it hard to keep his voice even. He glanced down at the stuffed animal Zoë carried. "Is that Celeste the elephant?" he asked.

Zoë nodded, and held it up for him to see. "Uh-huh," she said. "I used to have a Babar, but I lost it. Do you know Babar?"

"I do," Jared said. "I remember seeing your Babar too."

"I miss my Babar," Zoë said in a little voice, but then perked up. "But then Daddy got me Celeste, after he came back."

"How long was he away?" Jared asked.

Zoë shrugged. "A long time," she said. "He said he had things he had to do first. But he said he sent the Obin to protect me and watch out for me."

"And did they?" Jared asked.

"I guess so," she said. She shrugged and said in a low voice, "I don't like the Obin. They're boring."

"I can see that," Jared said. "I'm sorry you and your dad were kept apart for so long, Zoë. I know he loves you very much."

"I know," Zoë said. "I love him too. I love Daddy and Mommy and all the grandparents I never met and my friends from Covell too. I miss them. Do you think they miss me?"

"I'm sure they do," Jared said, and willfully avoided thinking about what happened to her friends. He looked back at Zoë and saw her being pouty. "What's wrong, sweetheart?" he asked.

"Daddy says that I have to go back to Phoenix with you," Zoë said. "He says that you're going to stay with me so he can finish up some work here."

"Your daddy and I talked about that," Jared said, carefully. "Do you not want to go back?"

"I want to go back with Daddy," she said, plaintively. "I don't want him to stay."

"He won't be gone very long," Jared said. "It's just the ship that we brought here to take you home is really small, and there's only going to be room in it for you and me."

"*You* could stay," Zoë said.

Jared laughed. "I wish I could, honey. But we'll have fun while we wait for your daddy, I promise. Is there anything you'd like to do when we get to Phoenix Station?"

"I want to buy some *candy,*" Zoë said. "They don't have any here. Daddy says the Obin don't make any. He tried to make me some once, though."

"How was it?" Jared asked.

"It was really *bad,*" Zoë said. "I want jawbreakers and butter-scotch and lollipops and jellybeans. I like the black ones."

"I remember that," Jared said. "The first time I saw you, you were eating black jellybeans."

"When was that?" Zoë asked.

"It was a long time ago, sweetie," Jared said. "But I remember it like it was yesterday. And when we go back, you can have any candy you want."

"But not too much," Zoë said. "Because then my stomach will hurt."

"Exactly right," Jared said. "And we really couldn't have that. A stomachache just wouldn't do."

Zoë smiled up at Jared and broke his heart. "You're silly, Mr. Jared," she said.

"Well," Jared said, smiling back. "I try."

"Okay, I'm going to go," Zoë said. "Daddy's taking a nap. He doesn't know I'm here. I'm going to go wake him up because I'm hungry."

"You go do that, Zoë," Jared said. "Thank you for visiting, Zoë. I'm really glad you came by."

"Okay," Zoë said, turned around, and waved back to him as she went. "Bye, Mr. Jared! See you later."

"See you later," Jared said, knowing he wouldn't.

"Love you!" Zoë said, in that casual way that kids do.

"Love you too," Jared whispered, as a parent. He waited until he heard a door close down the adjoining hall before he let himself release the ragged, tearing breath he had been holding in.

Jared looked at the lab, his eyes flitting over the console Boutin had brought in to manage the consciousness transfer, and lingering on the second crèche Boutin had brought in, the one in which he would place himself before sending over his consciousness to Jared's body, wiping out Jared's existence as if he were simply a placeholder, something put there to mark time until the body's true owner could take possession.

But then, Jared thought, wasn't that actually the case? It *was* Boutin who was intended to be in this body. That was why it was created. Jared was allowed to exist only because Boutin's consciousness refused at first to take up residence. It had to be coaxed in to share the mindspace Jared had created as caretaker. And now, irony of ironies, Botuin wanted it all, wanted to push Jared aside entirely. *Damn it,* Jared thought crazily. *I just got this brain set up the way I like it!* He laughed, and the laugh sounded shaky and weird to his ears. He tried to calm himself, bringing himself into a more rational state breath by breath.

Jared heard Boutin in his head, describing the wrongs of the Colonial Union, and heard the voice of Cainen, whom he trusted more to be honest about these things, echoing the sentiments. He looked into his own past as a member of the Special Forces, and the things they had done in the name of making the universe "safe for humanity." The Colonial Union *did* straddle every line of communication, directed every course of action, kept every aspect of humanity under tight control, and fought nearly every other race they knew of with persistent ferocity.

If the universe *was* as hostile as the Colonial Union said, perhaps this level of control was justified, for the overarching racial imperative of holding ground and making a place for humans in the universe. But if it *wasn't*—if what was fueling the Colonial Union's constant wars was not competition from the outside but paranoia and xenophobia from the inside—then Jared knew that he and everyone he'd known inside the Special Forces and out of it could have, in one way or another, led to the slow death of humanity that Boutin assured him was out there. He would have chosen to refuse to fight.

But, Jared thought, *Boutin isn't reliable*. Boutin labeled the Colonial Union as evil, but Boutin also chose to do evil things. He caused three separate races—two with long-standing issues—to come together to attack the Colonial Union, exposing billions of humans and billions of other intelligent creatures to the threat of war. He had experimented upon and killed Special Forces soldiers. He was planning to kill every single member of Special Forces and every other CDF soldier with his BrainPal virus, something akin to a genocide, considering the numbers and the unique makeup of the Colonial Defense Forces. And in killing the Colonial Defense Forces, Boutin would leave the colonies and Earth defenseless against any race who chose to claim one of the colonies as its own. The Obin couldn't stop the land rush from these other races—and probably wouldn't even if they could. The reward for the Obin was not land but consciousness.

The unprotected colonists would be doomed, Jared realized. Their colonies would be destroyed and there would be nowhere for them to go. It wasn't in the nature of the races in this part of the galaxy to share their worlds. Earth with its billions might survive; it would be hard to displace billions of humans without a fight. The more sparsely populated and less ecologically burdened colony planets would be far more attractive. But if someone decided to attack Earth, and the Earth had indeed been held back by the Colonial Union for its own purposes, it wouldn't be able to fully defend itself. It would survive, but the damage would be immense.

Doesn't Boutin see this? Jared asked himself. Perhaps he did, but chose to believe that it wouldn't happen that way. But maybe he simply never considered the consequences of his actions. When the Obin contacted him, perhaps all Boutin saw was a people so desperate for the thing he could give them that they would do anything to get it. Maybe Boutin asked for the moon and didn't give a thought to what he would do with the moon once he had it. Maybe Boutin didn't really think the Obin would really, truly give him the war he asked for.

Interlaced within all of this, Jared felt a sick-making worry for Zoë: What would happen to her if Boutin failed or was killed; what would happen to her if he succeeded? Jared felt guilty for worrying about what would happen to one small child when billions of lives would be

altered or ended, but he couldn't help himself. As much as anything, he was looking for a way where Zoë lived through all of it.

Jared felt overwhelmed by the choices he needed to make, and underwhelmed by the information he had to make them with, and utterly bereft at how little he would be able to do about any of it. He felt like he was probably the last person in the world who should be wrestling with all of this. But there was nothing to be done about it now. He closed his eyes and considered his options.

An hour later Jared opened his eyes as Boutin came through the door, trailed by an Obin. "You're awake," Boutin said.

"I am," Jared said.

"It's time for me to make the transfer," Boutin said. "I've programmed in the process and run the simulations; it looks like it's going to run perfectly. There's no point in putting it off anymore."

"Far be it from me to stop you from killing me," Jared said, casually.

Boutin paused; Jared saw that coming right out and mentioning his incipient murder disturbed Boutin. *Good,* Jared thought.

"About that," Boutin said. "Before we do the transfer, I can run a directive that will put you to sleep, if you want. You wouldn't feel a thing. I'm offering that to you. If you want."

"You don't seem to want it," Jared said.

"It makes the transfer more difficult, from what I can see from the simulations," Boutin said. "The transfer will take more securely if you're conscious as well."

"Well then, by all means I'll stay awake," Jared said. "I wouldn't want to make this more difficult for you."

"Listen, Dirac," Boutin said. "This isn't something personal. You have to understand that you offer a way to make this all happen quickly and cleanly, with the least amount of bloodshed on all sides. I'm sorry you have to die, but the alternative is far more death."

"Murdering every Colonial Defense Forces soldier with your virus doesn't strike me as the least amount of bloodshed," Jared said.

Boutin turned and told the Obin to start the preparations; the Obin went to the console and went to work.

"Tell me," Jared said. "After you've killed all the Colonial Defense Forces, who is going to protect the human colonies? They won't have defenders anymore. You'll have killed them all."

"The Obin will protect them in the short run," Boutin said. "Until we can create a new defense force."

"Are you sure about that?" Jared said. "Once you give them consciousness, why would they need to do anything for you anymore? Or do you plan to withhold consciousness until after they give you your *next* demand?"

Boutin gave a quick glance back at the Obin in the room, and then faced Jared. "I'm not *withholding* anything," he said. "They'll do it because they've agreed to it."

"Are you willing to bet the life of Zoë on it?" Jared asked. "Because that's what you're doing."

"Don't lecture me on *my* daughter," Boutin spat at Jared, and turned away. Jared gave a sad shudder, thinking of the choices he was making.

The Obin nodded over at Boutin; it was time. Boutin looked over to Jared one more time. "Anything else you want to say before we get started?" he asked Jared.

"I think I'll save it for later," Jared said.

Boutin opened his mouth to ask what that meant, but before he could, a noise erupted from outside the station. It sounded like a very large gun going off very rapidly.

Harvey lived for this sort of shit.

His chief worry as they approached the science station was that Lieutenant Sagan would do one of her patented thoughtful, methodical approaches; something sneaky that would require him to tiptoe around like a goddamn spy or something. He hated that crap. Harvey knew what he was and what he was best at: He was a noisy son of a bitch and he was good at making things fall down and go boom. In his few introspective moments, Harvey wondered if his progie, the guy he was mostly made from, hadn't been something really antisocial, like a pyromaniac or a professional wrestler, or maybe had done time for

assault. Whoever or whatever he was, Harvey would have been happy to give him a nice big smack on the lips. Harvey was absolutely at peace with his inner nature, in the sort of way that Zen Buddhist monks could only dream about. And so when Sagan told him his job was to draw attention to himself so she and Seaborg could do their jobs, Harvey did a little dance on the inside. He could definitely draw attention to himself.

The question was how.

Harvey was not especially introspective, but this didn't mean he was stupid. He was moral, within his lights; he understood the value of subtlety even if he wasn't much for it himself, and one of the reasons he could get away with being loud and obnoxious was that he was a fair stick at strategy and logistics. Give him a job and he'd do it, usually in the most entropy-producing way possible, yes, but also in a way that achieved exactly the aim it was supposed to. One of Harvey's guiding lights in terms of strategies was simplicity; all things being equal, Harvey preferred the course of action that let him get into the middle of things and then just buckle down. When asked about it, Harvey called it his Occam's razor theory of combat: The simplest way of kicking someone's ass was usually the correct one.

It was this philosophy that had Harvey taking the hovercraft Sagan had stolen, mounting it, and, after a few moments to glean the fundamentals of navigating it, rocketing on it toward the door of the Obin mess hall. As Harvey approached, the door to the mess hall opened inward; some Obin heading to duty after dinner. Harvey grinned a mad grin, gunned the hovercraft, and then braked it just enough (he hoped) to jam that fucking alien right back into the room.

It worked perfectly. The Obin had enough time for a surprised squawk before the hovercraft's gun struck it square in the chest, punching backward like it was a toy on a string, hurling down nearly the entire length of the hall. The other Obin in the room looked up while Harvey's victim pinwheeled to the ground, then turned their multiple eyes toward the doorway, Harvey, and the hovercraft with its big gun poking right into the room.

"Hello, boys!" Harvey said in a big, booming voice. "The 2nd Platoon sends its regards!" And with that, he jammed down the "fire"

button on the gun and set to work.

Things got messy real fast after that. It was just fucking beautiful.

Harvey loved his job.

• • •

From the other side of the compound, Seaborg heard Harvey start in on his happy work, and had just a little bit of an involuntary shudder. It's not that Seaborg disliked Harvey, but after a couple of combat drops with the 2nd Platoon one got the sense that if you didn't like things to explode unnecessarily around you, you would want to stay well clear of Daniel Harvey.

The crash and bang did exactly what it was supposed to—the Obin soldiers at the generator abandoned their posts to help out those of their number who were being cheerfully massacred on the other side of the compound. Seaborg did a modified sprint to the generators, wincing as he did so, and surprised what he guessed were some Obin scientists as he came through the door. Seaborg shot one with one of those weird Obin weapons, and then snapped the other one's neck. That was more disturbing than Seaborg would have expected; he felt the bones or whatever they were give way as he struck. Unlike Harvey, Seaborg was never a natural with violence; he wasn't much of a natural in anything. This was something he sensed early and hid with overcompensation, which is why so many of his training squad members thought he was an asshole. He got over it—someone is going to push you off a cliff if you don't—but what he never got over was the idea that when it came right down to it, Special Forces was not a good fit for him.

Seaborg went into the next room, which took up the majority of the shed and which housed the two massive forms Seaborg assumed were the batteries he had to destroy. Harvey's distraction was going to work only so long as Harvey managed to keep himself alive, which Seaborg doubted would be very long at all. Seaborg looked in the room for controls or panels that could help him or at least give some indication how he could shut down the power. He saw nothing; all the panels and controls were back in the room he left the two dead Obin in. Seaborg briefly wondered if he should have left one of them alive and tried to

convince it to shut down the power station, but he doubted he would have been very successful at all.

"Fuck," Seaborg said out loud in frustration, and for lack of anything better coming to mind, raised the Obin weapon and shot at one of the batteries. The projectile embedded in the metal skin of the huge battery, momentarily raising sparks, and then Seaborg heard a high-pitched whine, like air whistling out of a very small hole. He looked up at where he shot—a high-pressure stream of some green gas was spurting out. Seaborg looked at it.

What the hell, Seaborg thought, raising his weapon and aiming at the hole from which the stream was emanating. *Let's see if that shit's flammable*.

It was.

The power generator blast knocked Jane Sagan right on her ass and blinded her for a good three seconds; she recovered sight just in time to see large chunks of the power generator's room hurling through the sky in her general direction. Sagan backtracked enough to avoid the debris and instinctually checked her integration to see if by some miracle Seaborg had managed to survive. There was nothing there, of course. You don't survive a blast like that. She could feel Harvey, though, shocked for a moment out of his orgy of violence. Sagan turned her attention to the science station itself, its windows shattered and parts on fire, and it took her several seconds of formulating a plan before she realized that she *had* integration once more. Knocking out the power somehow brought back her BrainPal.

Sagan took an entirely inappropriate two seconds to revel in the return of her integration and BrainPal before she wondered if she were still integrated with someone else.

• • •

The blast knocked both Boutin and the Obin to the floor; Jared felt his crèche shake violently. It managed to stay upright, as did the second crèche. The lights went out, to be replaced a second later by the soft green glow of lights running on emergency power. The Obin got up

and went to the wall to activate the lab's backup generator. Boutin picked himself up, cried for Zoë and ran out of the room. Jared watched him go, his own heart in his mouth.

::Dirac,:: Jane Sagan said. ::Answer me.:: Integration flowed over Jared like golden light.

::I'm here,:: Jared said.

::Is Boutin still alive?:: Sagan asked.

::Yes,:: Jared said. ::But he's no longer the target for the mission.::

::I don't understand you,:: Sagan said.

::Jane,:: Jared said, using Sagan's first name for the first time either could remember. ::Zoë's alive. Zoë's here. His daughter. You need to find her. You need to get her away as fast as you can.::

There was an infinitesimal hesitation from Sagan. ::You need to tell me everything, now,:: Sagan said. ::And you'd better hurry.::

As quickly as he could, Jared dumped everything he learned from Boutin to Sagan, including the recordings of the conversations he'd begun to create as soon as Boutin restored his BrainPal capacity, hoping against hope that some of his squad might have survived and would have found a way in to him. Sagan wouldn't have time to go through all the conversations, but they were there, for the record.

::We should still take Boutin back,:: Sagan said, after Jared finished.

::NO,:: Jared sent the word as strongly as possible. ::As long as he's alive the Obin will come for him. He's their key to the thing they want the most. If they were going to go to war because he asked them to, they would go to war to get him back.::

::Then I'll kill him,:: Sagan said.

::Get Zoë,:: Jared said. ::I'll take care of Boutin.::

::How?:: Sagan said.

::Trust me,:: Jared said.

::Dirac,:: Sagan began.

::I know you *don't* trust me,:: Jared said. ::And I know why you don't trust me. But I also remember what you once told me, Lieutenant. You told me, no matter what, to remember that I was Jared Dirac. I'm telling you now, Lieutenant. I know who I am. I am Jared Dirac of the Colonial Union Special Forces, and my job is to save humanity. I am asking you to trust me to do my job.::

An infinitely long pause. From the hallway, Jared heard Boutin heading back to the lab.

::Do your job, Private,:: Sagan said.

::I will,:: Jared said. ::Thank you.::

::I'll find Zoë,:: Sagan said.

::Tell her you're a friend of Mr. Jared, and that he and Daddy both said it was okay to go with you,:: Jared said. ::And don't forget her stuffed elephant.:: Jared sent information on where he thought Zoë would be, just down the hall from the lab.

::I won't,:: Sagan said.

::I need to break integration with you now,:: Jared said. ::Good-bye, Lieutenant. Thank you. Thank you for it all.::

::Good-bye, Jared,:: Sagan said, and before she broke integration sent him a wave of something that resembled reassurance. And then she was gone.

Jared was alone.

Boutin reentered the lab and yelled at the Obin, who snapped some switches. The lights came back up in the lab.

"Let's get going," Boutin said to the Obin. "We're under attack. We need to get this done now." Boutin looked over to Jared briefly. Jared just smiled and closed his eyes and listened to the sounds of the Obin tapping on the panel, Boutin opening and entering his crèche, and the low thrum of Jared's own crèche powering up for the consciousness transfer.

Jared's primary regret at the end of his life was that there had been so little of it. Just a year. But that year, so many people and experiences. Jared walked with them in his mind and felt their presence a final time: Jane Sagan, Harry Wilson, Cainen. General Mattson and Colonel Robbins. The 2nd Platoon, and the closeness they shared in integration. The strangeness of Captain Martin and the Gamerans. The jokes he shared with Lieutenant Cloud. Sarah Pauling, best beloved. And Zoë. Zoë who would live, if only Sagan could find her. And she would.

No, Jared thought. *No regrets. Not one. Not for anything.*

Jared heard the soft tap as the Obin initiated the transfer sequence. He held on to himself as long as he could. Then he let go.

Zoë screamed when there was a big roar that shook her room so hard she fell right off her bed and her TV came off the wall. Nanny came over to see if she was okay, but Zoë pushed it away. She didn't want Nanny, she wanted Daddy, and sure enough in just a minute he came through the door, sweeping her up in his arms and reassuring her and telling her that everything was going to be all right. Then he set her down and said to her that in just a few minutes Mr. Jared would be coming for her and she had to do what Mr. Jared said, but for now to stay in her room and with Nanny, because she would be safe there.

Zoë cried again for a minute and told Daddy that she didn't want him to leave, and he said that he would never leave her again. It didn't make sense because Mr. Jared was coming to get her in just a minute to take her away, but it made her feel better anyway. Then Daddy spoke to Nanny and left. Nanny went into the living room and came back holding one of those guns the Obin used. This was weird because as far as Zoë knew Nanny never used a weapon before. There were no more explosions but every once in a while Zoë could hear gunfire, going *pop pop pop* somewhere outside. Zoë got back on her bed, clutched Celeste and waited for Mr. Jared.

Nanny gave out a shriek and raised the weapon at something Zoë couldn't see and then ran out from the doorway. Zoë screamed and hid under the bed, crying, remembering what it was like at Covell and wondering if those chicken things were going to come get her again like they did there. She heard some thumping in the next room and then a scream. Zoë covered her ears and closed her eyes.

When she opened them again there were a pair of feet in the room, coming over to the bed. Zoë put a hand over her mouth to be quiet, but couldn't help a whimper or two. Then the feet became knees and hands and arms, and then a sideways head appeared and said something. Zoë squealed and tried to back out from underneath the bed, clutching Celeste, but as soon as she popped out the woman grabbed her and held her. Zoë kicked and screamed, and it was only after a while that Zoë realized that the woman was saying her name over and over again.

"It's all right, Zoë," the woman was saying. "It's all right. Shhhh. Shhhh. It's all right."

Zoë eventually stopped trying to get away and turned her head around. "Where's my daddy?" she said. "Where's Mr. Jared?"

"They both really busy right now," the woman said, still holding Zoë. "They told me to come get you and make sure you were all right. I'm Miss Jane."

"Daddy said I had to wait here until Mr. Jared came to get me," Zoë said.

"I know he did," Miss Jane said. "But right now they both have things they have to do. There's a lot going on right now, and it's keeping both of them from coming to find you. That's why they sent me, to keep you safe."

"Nanny keeps me safe," Zoë said.

"Nanny was called away," Miss Jane said. "It's really busy here right now."

"I heard something really loud," Zoë offered.

"Well, that's one of the things keeping everybody busy," Miss Jane said.

"Okay," Zoë said, doubtfully.

"Now, Zoë," Miss Jane said. "What I want you to do is put your arms around my shoulders, and your legs around my waist, hold on to me *real* tight, and keep your eyes closed until I tell you to open them. Can you do that?"

"Uh-huh," Zoë said. "But how will I hold Celeste?"

"Well, let's put her in between you and me right here," Miss Jane said, and put Celeste between her tummy and Zoë's.

"She'll get squished," Zoë said.

"I know," Miss Jane said. "But it'll be all right. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," Zoë said.

"Then close your eyes and hold on real tight," Miss Jane said, and Zoë did, even though when they walked out of her bedroom Zoë's eyes hadn't closed yet and as they came into the living room Zoë saw what looked like Nanny sleeping on the floor. Then Zoë closed her eyes all the way and waited for Miss Jane to tell her to open them again.

The Obin Sagan had encountered in the science building largely avoided her, leading her to believe they were mostly specialized as scientists, but every now and again one of them would try to engage her with a weapon or try attacking her physically. The quarters were too close to wield the awkward Obin rifle with any sort of accuracy; Sagan stuck with the knife and being quick. This approach failed her when the Obin babysitting Zoë nearly took off her head; Sagan threw the knife at the Obin to distract it and then launched herself at it, fighting it out hand to hand. Sagan knew she was lucky that while they were rolling on the floor the Obin got a leg caught up in the furniture; it gave her just enough time to squirm out of its grip, get on top of it and strangle the thing to death. With Zoë collected and held in the crook of her arm, it was time to get out.

::Harvey,:: Sagan said.

::Kind of busy right now,:: Harvey said. Through her integration Sagan could see him fighting his way toward a new hovercraft; he crashed his previous one into an airship that was trying to get off the ground and kill him from above.

::I've got the target and I need support. And a ride.::

::Five minutes and you'll have both,:: Harvey said. ::Just don't rush me.::

::I'm rushing you,:: Sagan said, and then stopped the conversation. The hallway in front of Boutin's apartment led north, past Boutin's lab, and east, into other parts of the building. The lab hallway would connect her quicker to where Harvey could pick them up, but Sagan didn't want to risk Zoë seeing either her father or Jared as they went by. Sagan sighed, went back into the apartment, and retrieved the Obin weapon, felt it balance awkwardly in her grip. It was a two-handed weapon, and the hands were meant to be Obin, not human. Sagan hoped that everyone had abandoned the building or would be busy going after Harvey, and that she wouldn't have to use it.

She had to use it three times, the third time using it to batter an Obin when the ammunition ran out. The Obin screamed. So did Zoë, each time Sagan had to use the weapon. But she kept her eyes shut, like she promised.

Sagan reached the place where she came into the building, a blown-out window on the first floor of a stairwell. ::Where are you?:: she said to Harvey.

::Believe it or not, the Obin aren't keen to give me their equipment,:: Harvey sent. ::Stop bugging me. I'll be there soon.::

"Are we safe yet?" Zoë asked, her voice muffled from her head being buried in Sagan's neck.

"Not yet," Sagan said. "Soon, Zoë."

"I want my daddy," Zoë said.

"I know, Zoë," Sagan said. "Shhh."

From the floors above Sagan heard movement.

Come on, Harvey, Sagan thought. *Get moving*.

• • •

The Obin were really beginning to piss Harvey off. Mowing down a couple dozen of them in the mess hall had been a uniquely satisfying experience, to be sure—cathartic, particularly in light of how the Obin bastards killed off most of the 2nd Platoon. And ramming the little hovercraft into that airship had held its own special pleasures. But once Harvey was on foot, he began to realize just how many of those damn Obin there were, and how much more difficult it was to manage them when one was hoofing it. And then here was Sagan—integrated again, and that was a good thing—but telling him she needed a *ride*. As if he weren't *busy*.

She's the boss, Harvey said. Getting one of the parked hovercraft was proving to be difficult; the Obin had them in a yard with only one way in. But there were at least two of them out and around, looking for him.

And look, Harvey said, as one zoomed into view, *here comes one now*. Harvey had been crouched down and trying to be inconspicuous, but now he stepped out where he could be seen and waved his hands broadly. "Hey!" Harvey yelled. "Asshole! Come get me, you creepy fuck!"

Whether by hearing him or seeing him move, the Obin operating the hovercraft turned toward Harvey. *Okay,* Harvey thought. *Now what the fuck do I do?*

The first order of business, it turned out, was jumping clear of the stream of fléchettes that blasted out of the hovercraft's gun. Harvey rolled, came out of the roll prone and lined up his Obin weapon to shoot at the now-receding Obin. Harvey's first shot wasn't even close; the second took off the back of the Obin's head.

That's why you wear a helmet, jackass, Harvey thought, and went to retrieve his prize and then retrieve Sagan. Along the way a number of Obin on foot tried to do to Harvey what he had done to the Obin previously driving the hovercraft. Harvey preferred to run them down rather than shoot them, but he wasn't picky.

::Ride's here,:: Harvey said to Sagan, and then was more than a little surprised to see what Sagan was carrying. ::That's a kid,:: he said.

::I know that,:: Sagan said, positioning Zoë securely on the hovercraft. ::Get to the capture pod as fast as you can.:: Harvey accelerated to full speed and fled straight. There didn't seem to be any immediate chase.

::I thought we were supposed to bring back Boutin,:: Harvey said.

::Change of plans,:: Sagan said.

::Where's Boutin?:: Harvey asked.

::Dirac's taking care of him,:: Sagan said.

::Dirac,:: Harvey said, surprised again. ::I figured he was dead.::

::I'm pretty sure he is,:: Sagan said.

::Then how is he going to take care of Boutin?:: Harvey said.

::I have no idea,:: Sagan said. ::I just know he will.::

Boutin opened his eyes in a brand-new body.

Well, not brand-new, he corrected. *Gently used.*

His Obin assistant opened his crèche and helped him out of it; Boutin took a few tentative steps and then a few non-tentative ones. Boutin looked around the lab and was fascinated to see how much more vibrant and engaging it was; it was if his senses had been at low volume all his life and then were suddenly cranked up to full. Even a science lab looked good.

Boutin looked over to his old body, which was brain-dead but still breathing; it would die of its own accord in a few hours or a day at

most. Boutin would use this new body's capabilities to record its death and then take the evidence with him to the capture pod, along with his daughter. *If the pod's still there,* he quickly amended; it was clear that the Special Forces squad they had captured had somehow escaped. One of them might have taken it back. *Well,* Boutin thought, *that's fine*. He was already spinning an alternative story in his head, one in which he—as Dirac—killed Boutin. The Obin, denied their prize of consciousness, would stop the war and give Dirac permission to leave with Boutin's body and Zoë.

Hmmmm, that's not quite *believable,* Boutin thought. He'd have to work out the details. Whatever story he thought of, however—

Boutin suddenly became aware of a small image flitting across his field of vision. It was a picture of an envelope.

You have a message from Jared Dirac, read a block of text that appeared in the bottom of his field of view. To open it, say "open."

"Open," Boutin said out loud. This was curious.

The envelope opened and then faded. Rather than a text message, it was a voice message.

"Hello, Boutin," it said, in a simulated voice that sounded just like Dirac—sounded just like *him* now, actually, Boutin corrected. "I see that you have gone ahead and taken this body. But before I go, I thought I'd just leave you some final thoughts.

"A wise creature once told me that it was important to make choices," the voice continued. "Through much of my short life I made no choices at all, or at least no choices of consequence. But now at the end of my life, I am faced with a choice. I can't choose whether to live or die—you have made that choice for me. But when you told me that I had no choice but to help you with your plans, you made a mistake. I do have a choice, and I've made it.

"My choice is not to help you. I can't judge whether the Colonial Union is the best government for humanity; I didn't have the time to learn everything I should have learned about it. But I choose not to risk the deaths of millions or even billions by helping you engineer its overthrow. It may be that this will ultimately be the wrong decision to have made. But it is my decision, the one I think that best allows me to do what I was born to do. To keep humanity safe.

"There is some irony here, Boutin, in that you and I share so many of the same thoughts, share a common consciousness, and perhaps share the same goal of doing the best for our people—and yet with all we have in common, we have reached opposite conclusions on how to do that. I wish we had had more time between us, that I had been able to meet you as a friend and a brother instead of what I became to you, a vessel to pour yourself into. It's too late for that now. Too late for me, and although you don't realize it, too late for you also.

"Be that as it may, I want to thank you. For better or for worse, I was alive because of you, and for a brief time, I was able to experience the joys and sorrows this life has to offer. And I was able to meet and love Zoë, who I pray now will find a way to be safe. I owe you my life, Charles, just as I owe you my death.

"Now, allow me a digression, which I promise will come around to a compelling point. As you may or may not know, one of the interesting properties SmartBlood has is the ability to instantly oxidize —to combust. I can't help but think someone encoded that property into SmartBlood as something of a cruel joke, because I first saw it being used to kill insects that were trying to suck SmartBlood out of a Special Forces soldier. But it turned out to be useful too—it once saved my life in combat.

"Charles, you have engineered a virus that you plan to use to conquer the Colonial Union. Since you know about viruses as they relate to computers, maybe you've heard of the term *Trojan horse* as well. This message, my friend and brother, is a Trojan horse. When you opened the letter, you also executed a small program I created. The program instructs every nanobot in my SmartBlood to combust simultaneously on my command. I estimate it's taken exactly this long for the program to propagate through all of my SmartBlood.

"Let's find out."

Sagan received a message as she was placing Zoë into the capture pod. It was from Jared Dirac.

::If you're reading this, Charles Boutin is dead,:: it said. ::I had this message scheduled to be sent right after my former BrainPal executed a

program to combust my SmartBlood. If the combustion doesn't kill him—and it will—he'll be dead of asphyxiation in just a few minutes. Either way, he's gone and so am I. I don't know if you'll get it but I hope you do, and that you are safe and well. Good-bye, Lieutenant Sagan. I'm glad to have known you. And if you see Cainen again, tell him I listened to him and made my choice.::

Sagan shared the message with Harvey. ::Very nice,:: Harvey said. ::He was Special Forces through and through.::

::Yes, he was,:: Sagan said, and motioned Harvey toward the capture pod. ::Get in, Harvey::

::You're joking,:: Harvey said.

::Someone needs to go back with Zoë,:: Sagan said. ::I'm commanding officer. I stay behind.::

::Lieutenant,:: Harvey said. ::That kid doesn't know me. You're the one who pulled her out of there. You're the one who needs to go back with her. And besides, I don't want to go back yet. I'm having too much *fun*. I'm guessing that between now and the time the Colonial Union drops a rock on this place I can clean it out. And when I'm done with that maybe I'll go in and see if there's anything worth salvaging. So you go ahead, Sagan. Have them send a capture pod for me in a couple of days. I'll be fine, or I'll be dead. Either way I'll enjoy myself.::

::All right,:: Sagan said. ::If you do go into the compound again, try to get the storage devices from the transfer module in Boutin's lab. Make it a priority.::

::What's on them?:: Harvey said.

::It's not what,:: Sagan said. ::It's who.::

There was a hum in the distance. ::They're on to us,:: Harvey said. ::Get in, Lieutenant::

"Are we safe now?" Zoë asked, a few minutes after launch.

"Yes, Zoë," Sagan said. "I think we are."

"When is Daddy coming to see me?" Zoë said.

"I don't know, Zoë," Sagan said, and stroked Zoë's hair. "I don't know."

In the cramped confines of the capture pod, Zoë put her arms up to be held. Sagan held her.

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FIFTEEN

"Well, Szi, you were right," General Mattson said. "Jared Dirac came in handy after all."

Mattson, General Szilard and Colonel Robbins were in the general's mess, eating lunch. All of them, this time: General Mattson had been the one to formally break the tradition of not letting subordinates eat by ordering Robbins a huge plate of spaghetti Bolognese, and responding to another outraged general's reaction by saying, clearly and loudly, "Shut the fuck up, you dried-up turd. This man deserves some goddamned pasta." Since then, other generals had begun to bring in their staffs as well.

"Thank you, General," Szilard said. "Now, if you don't mind, what I want to know is what you're doing to fix these problems with our BrainPals. I lost seven ships because your people left a back door wide open."

"Robbins has the details," Mattson said. They both turned to Robbins, who had a mouthful of beef Wellington. Robbins swallowed carefully.

"In the short run, we pulled out that back door, obviously," Robbins said. "We've propagated the fix on a priority upgrade to the BrainPals. That's fixed. In the slightly longer run, we're going through all the BrainPal programming looking for legacy code, back doors and other code that could represent a security issue. And we're also instituting virus checks for messages and information sent between BrainPals. Boutin's virus transmission wouldn't work now."

"It shouldn't have worked at all," Szilard said. "There have been virus blockers since right near the dawn of computing and you didn't implement it for BrainPals. You could have killed us all because you forgot to program in basic computer hygiene."

"It was never programmed in because there was never a need for it," Mattson said. "BrainPals are a closed system, totally secure from outside attacks. Even Boutin's attack ultimately didn't work."

"But it came damn close," Szilard said.

"Yes, well, it came damn close because someone at the table wanted to create a body we could stuff Charles Boutin's consciousness in," Mattson said. "Not that I'm going to name names."

"Hmmmm," Szilard said.

"The current series of BrainPals are coming to a close anyway," Robbins said. "Our next generation of BrainPals have been tested by the Gamerans and they're ready to be implemented across the CDF population. It's a completely different architecture, fully organic, and the code is optimized, without the legacy issues of earlier BrainPal code. The window is closing on this sort of attack, General."

"At least by anyone who worked on the previous generation," Szilard said. "But what about those who are working on the current generation? You need to find out whether any of them are going to go off the ranch."

"We'll look into it," Robbins said.

"See that you do," Szilard said.

"Speaking of off the ranch," Mattson said. "What are you going to do about Lieutenant Sagan?"

"What do you mean?" Szilard said.

"Not to put too fine a point on it, she knows too much," Mattson said. "Through Boutin and Dirac, she knows about the Conclave and she knows how tightly we're keeping that information bottled up. She doesn't have clearance for that information, Szi. That's dangerous stuff."

"I don't see why it's dangerous," Szilard said. "If for no other reason than it's the truth. The Conclave is out there. And if it ever gets its act together, we're going to find ourselves up the proverbial creek."

"It's dangerous because it's not the whole truth, and you *know* that, Szi," Mattson said. "Boutin didn't know anything about the Counter-Conclave and how deeply we're involved with *that*, and how we've been playing one side against the other. Things are moving fast. We're getting to the point where alliances have to be formed and choices will have to be made. We won't be able to formally stay neutral anymore. We don't need Sagan out there telling people half the story and starting rumors."

"Then tell her the whole damn story," Szilard said. "She's an intelligence officer, for God's sake. She can handle the truth."

"It's not up to me," Mattson said. Szilard opened his mouth; Mattson put up both hands. "It's *not* up to *me*, Szi. If the Counter-Conclave formally breaks with the Conclave, you know what that's going to mean. The entire goddamn galaxy is going to be at war. We won't just be able to rely on our recruits from Earth anymore. We're going to have to ask the colonies to pony up as well. We may even have to start conscription. And you know what *that's* going to mean. The colonies will riot. We'll be lucky if we avoid a civil war. We're keeping the information from the colonies not because we want to keep them ignorant but because we don't want the whole fucking Union to fly apart."

"The longer we wait, the worse it's going to get," Szilard said. "We're never going to find a good way to break it to the colonies. And when they do find out, they're going to wonder what the hell the CU was doing keeping it from them for so long."

"It's not up to me," Mattson said.

"Yes, yes," Szilard said, testily. "Fortunately for you there's a way out. Sagan is close to the end of her term of service. She has a few months left, I think. Maybe a year. Close enough that we can retire her. From what I understand she was planning to leave the service when her time was up anyway. We'll put her on a brand-new colony and there she can stay, and if she talks to the neighbors about some Conclave, who the hell cares. They'll be too busy trying to get a crop in."

"Do you think you'll get her to do it?" Mattson said.

"We can entice her," Szilard said. "A couple of years ago, Sagan became quite attached to a CDF soldier named John Perry. Perry's a

few years behind her in his term of service, but if we needed to we could spring him early. And it seems like she's become quite attached to Zoë Boutin, who is an orphan and who needs to be placed. You see where I'm going here."

"I can," Mattson said. "You should make it happen."

"I'll see what I can do," Szilard said. "And speaking of secrets, how are your negotiations with the Obin going?"

Both Mattson and Robbins looked at Szilard warily. "There are no negotiations with the Obin," Robbins said.

"Of course not," Szilard said. "You're not negotiating with the Obin to continue Boutin's consciousness program for them. And the Obin are not negotiating with us to knock down whichever of the Rraey or Eneshans is still left standing after their upcoming little war. No one's negotiating with anyone about anything. And how are these non-negotiations not going?"

Robbins looked at Mattson, who nodded. "They're not going surprisingly well," Robbins said. "We probably won't reach an agreement in the next couple of days."

"How not wonderful," Szilard said.

"I want to get back to Sagan," Mattson said. "When do you think you'll be able to get an answer from her?"

"I'll put it to her today," Szilard said. "And I'll tell her to be ready in a week. That should give her time to take care of things that need to be done."

"Like what?" Mattson said.

"Good-byes and closure, of course," Szilard said. "And a few other decisions I am going to ask her to make."

Jane Sagan peered into what looked like a miniature light show. "What is this?" she asked.

"It's Jared Dirac's soul," Cainen said.

Sagan glanced over to him. "I remember you once told me that Special Forces soldiers didn't have souls," she said.

"That was another place, and another time," Cainen said. "And I am not so very foolish now. But very well, it's his consciousness, then,"

Cainen said. “Retrieved by one of your soldiers, I believe, and from what I understand recorded by Charles Boutin. And I understand it is your job to decide what to do with it.”

Sagan nodded. Szilard had come to her, offering her discharge, the discharge of John Perry and the custodianship of Zoë Boutin, on the condition that she keep her mouth shut about the Conclave and that she make a decision about what to do with Jared Dirac’s consciousness.

::I understand about the Conclave,:: Sagan said. ::But I don’t understand about Dirac.::

::I’m just curious what you’ll do,:: Szilard said, and refused to explain it any further than that.

“What will you do with it?” Cainen asked.

“What do you think I should do?” Sagan asked.

“I know precisely what you should do with it,” Cainen said. “But I am not you and I will not tell you what I would do with it until I hear what you would do with it first.”

Sagan looked over at Harry Wilson, who was watching with interest. “And what would you do, Harry?”

“Sorry, Jane,” Wilson said, and smiled. “I plead the Fifth as well. This is your call.”

“You could bring him back,” Sagan said to Cainen.

“It’s possible,” Cainen said. “We know more about it now than we did before. It’s possible we could condition the brain better than they conditioned Dirac’s brain to accept Boutin’s personality. There’s some risk of the transfer not taking, and then you’d have a situation like what happened with Dirac, where another personality would grow instead, and the other personality would slowly impinge. But I think it’s less of a risk now, and in time, it won’t be a serious risk at all. I think we could bring him back, if that’s what you wanted.”

“But it’s not what Jared wanted, is it?” Sagan said. “He knew his consciousness had been recorded. He could have asked me to try to save it. He didn’t.”

“No, he didn’t,” Cainen agreed.

“Jared made his choice,” Sagan said. “And it was his choice to make. Erase the recording, please, Cainen.”

"And now you see why I know you have a soul," Cainen said. "Please accept my apology that I ever doubted it."

"Apology unneeded," Sagan said. "But apology accepted."

"Thank you," Cainen said. "And now, Lieutenant Sagan, I was wondering if I could ask a favor of you. Or perhaps it's not so much of a favor as calling due a debt between us."

"What is it?" Sagan asked.

Cainen looked past Sagan to Wilson, who looked suddenly very uncomfortable. "You don't have to stay for this, my friend," Cainen said to Wilson.

"Of course I'll stay," Wilson said. "But let me reiterate: You're a damn fool."

"Noted," Cainen said. "And I appreciate the thought."

Wilson crossed his arms and looked vexed.

"Tell me," Sagan said.

"I wish to die, Lieutenant," Cainen said. "Over the last several months, I have begun to feel the effects of the antidote you provide lessen. Every day I am in increasing pain."

"We can give you more," Sagan said.

"Yes, and perhaps that would work," Cainen said. "But I am in pain, beyond the mere physical aspect. I am far away from my people and my home, and far from the things that bring me joy. I cherish the friendships I have with Harry Wilson and with you—you! of all people—but every day I feel the part of myself that is Rraey, the part that is *truly* me, grow colder and smaller. Not too long from now there will be nothing left of it and I will be alone, absolutely alone. I will be alive, but I'll be dead inside."

"I can talk to General Szilard about releasing you," Sagan said.

"That's what I told him," Wilson said.

"You know they'll never release me," Cainen said. "I've done too much work for you now. I know far too much. And even if you did release me, do you think the Rraey would welcome me back? No, Lieutenant. I am far from home, and I know that I can never go back to it."

"I'm sorry I did this to you, Cainen," Sagan said. "If I could change this for you I would."

"Why would you?" Cainen said. "You've saved your people from war, Lieutenant. I am merely part of the cost."

"I am still sorry," Sagan said.

"Then repay that debt to me," Cainen said. "Help me die."

"How would I do that?" Sagan said.

"In my studies of human culture I've learned about seppuku," Cainen said. "Do you know it?" Sagan shook her head. "Ritual suicide, from your Japanese people. The ritual includes a *Kaishakunin,* a second —someone who eases the pain of the person committing seppuku by killing them at the moment of their greatest agony. I would choose to die from the disease you inflicted on me, Lieutenant Sagan, but I fear that when the agony is greatest I would cry for mercy, as I did the very first time, shaming myself and setting myself in motion on the path that led us here. A second would keep me from that shame. I ask you to be my second, Lieutenant Sagan."

"I don't think the Colonial Defense Forces will allow me to kill you," Sagan said. "Outside of combat."

"Yes, and I find that ironic beyond belief," Cainen said. "However, in this case they will. I've already asked General Mattson for permission, and he has granted it. I've also asked General Szilard for permission for you to be my second. He has granted it."

"What will you do if I refuse?" Sagan asked.

"You know what I will do," Cainen said. "When we first met you told me that you believed that I wanted to live, and you were right. But as I said earlier, that was a different place and a different time. In this time and place, I want to be released. If it means I do it alone, than I will be alone. But I hope that will not be the case."

"It won't," Sagan said. "I accept, Cainen. I will be your second."

"From the depths of my soul I thank you, Lieutenant Sagan, my friend." Cainen looked to Wilson, who was crying. "And you, Harry? I asked you to attend me before and you refused. I ask you again."

Wilson nodded, violently. "Yes," he said. "I'll do it, you lousy son of a bitch. I'll be there when you die."

"Thank you, Harry," Cainen said, and once again turned to Sagan. "I need two days to bring things to a close here. Will you come to visit me on the third day, in the evening?"

"I'll be there," Sagan said.

"Your combat knife, I think, should be sufficient," Cainen said.

"If that's what you want," Sagan said. "Is there anything else you would have me do for you?"

"Only one other thing," Cainen said. "And I'll understand if you can't do it."

"Name it," Sagan said.

"I was born on the colony of Fala," Cainen said. "I grew up there. When I die, if I can, I'd like to return there. I know it will be a difficult thing to manage."

"I'll manage it," Sagan said. "Even if I have to take you there myself. I promise it, Cainen. I promise that you'll go home."

A month after Zoë and Sagan returned to Phoenix Station, Sagan took Zoë on a shuttle to visit the gravestone of her parents.

The shuttle pilot was Lieutenant Cloud, who asked after Jared. Sagan told him that he had passed on. Lieutenant Cloud was quiet for a moment and then began telling Sagan the jokes that Jared had told him. Sagan laughed.

At the gravestone, Sagan stood while Zoë knelt and read the names of her parents, clearly and calmly. Over the month, Sagan had seen Zoë change from the tentative girl she'd first met, seemingly younger than she really was, asking plaintively for her father, to someone happier and more talkative and closer to the age she was. Which was, as it happened, only a little younger than Sagan.

"My name is here," Zoë said, tracing the name with her finger.

"For a while, when you were first taken, your father thought you were dead," Sagan said.

"Well, I'm *not* dead," Zoë said, defiantly.

"No," Sagan said, and smiled. "No, you definitely are not."

Zoë put her hand on her father's name. "He's not really here, is he?" Zoë asked. "Here under me."

"No," Sagan said. "He died on Arist. That was where you were before we came here."

"I know," Zoë said, and looked over to Sagan. "Mr. Jared died there too, didn't he?"

"He did," Sagan said.

"He said he knew me, but I didn't really remember him," Zoë said.

"He did know you, but it's hard to explain," Sagan said. "I'll explain it to you when you're older."

Zoë looked at the tombstone again. "All the people who knew me have gone away," she said, in a small, singsong voice. "All my people are gone."

Sagan got down on her knees behind Zoë and gave her a small but fierce hug. "I'm so sorry, Zoë."

"I know," Zoë said. "I'm sorry too. I miss Daddy and Mommy and I even miss Mr. Jared a little, even though I didn't know him very much."

"I know they miss you too," Sagan said. She came around to face Zoë. "Listen, Zoë, soon I'm going to be going to a colony, where I'm going to live. If you want, you can come with me."

"Will it just be you and me?" Zoë said.

"Well, you and me and a man I love very much," Sagan said.

"Will I like him?" Zoë asked.

"I think so," Sagan said. "I like him, and I like you, so it stands to reason you would like each other. You, me, and him."

"Like a family," Zoë said.

"Yes, like a family," Sagan said. "Very much like one."

"But I already have a daddy and a mommy," Zoë said.

"I know, Zoë," said Sagan. "I would never want you to forget them, ever. John and I would just be the two grown-ups who will be very lucky to get to live with you."

"John," Zoë said. "John and Jane. John and Jane and Zoë."

"John and Jane and Zoë," Sagan repeated.

"John and Jane and Zoë," Zoë said, standing up and moving to the rhythms of the names. "John and Jane and Zoë. John and Jane and Zoë! I like that," Zoë said.

"I like it too," Sagan said.

"Well, okay then," Zoë said. "And now I'm hungry."

Sagan laughed. "Well then, let's get you something to eat."

"Okay," Zoë said. "Let me say bye-bye to Mommy and Daddy." She ran to the headstone and planted a kiss on it. "I love you," she said, and then raced back to Sagan, and took her hand. "I'm ready. Let's eat."

"Okay," Sagan said. "What would you like?"

"What do we have?" Zoë said.

"There are lots of choices," Sagan said. "Pick one."

"All right," Zoë said. "I'm *very* good at making choices, you know."

"Well," Sagan said, hugging the girl close. "I'm so very glad to hear it."

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Chad Brink mailed me a copy of one of my books to sign, and it took me several months to return it to him. In fact, I may still have it here. I figure putting him in the acknowledgments of this book makes up for being a bad book-mailer-backer. Also, clearly, you should not mail your books to me to sign. It's not you, it's me.

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THE LAST COLONY

John Scalzi

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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To Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden, friends and editors.
To Heather and Bob, brother and sister.
To Athena, daughter.
To Kristine, everything.

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ONE

Let me tell you of the worlds I've left behind.

Earth you know; everyone knows it. It's the birthplace of humanity, although at this point not many consider it our "home" planet—Phoenix has had that job since the Colonial Union was created and became the guiding force for expanding and protecting our race in the universe. But you never forget where you come from.

Being from Earth in this universe is like being a small-town kid who gets on the bus, goes to the big city and spends his entire afternoon gawking at all the tall buildings. Then he gets mugged for the crime of marveling at this strange new world, which has such things in it, because the things in it don't have much time or sympathy for the new kid in town, and they're happy to kill him for what he's got in his suitcase. The small-town kid learns this fast, because he can't go home again.

I spent seventy-five years on Earth, living mostly in the same small Ohio town and sharing most of that life with the same woman. She died and stayed behind. I lived and I left.

The next world is metaphorical. The Colonial Defense Forces took me off Earth and kept the parts of me they wanted: my consciousness, and some small part of my DNA. From the latter they built me a new body, which was young and quick and strong and beautiful and only partially human. They stuffed my consciousness inside of it, and gave me not nearly enough time to glory in my second youth. Then they took this beautiful body that was now me and spent the next several

years actively trying to get it killed by throwing me at every hostile alien race it could.

There were a lot of those. The universe is vast, but the number of worlds suitable for human life is surprisingly small, and as it happens space is filled with numerous other intelligent species who want the same worlds we do. Very few of these species, it seems, are into the concept of sharing; we're certainly not. We all fight, and the worlds we can inhabit swap back and forth between us until one or another gets a grip on it so tight we can't be pried off. Over a couple of centuries, we humans have managed this trick on several dozen worlds, and failed this trick on dozens more. None of this has made us very many friends.

I spent six years in this world. I fought and I nearly died, more than once. I had friends, most of whom died but some of whom I saved. I met a woman who was achingly like the one I shared my life with on Earth, but who was nevertheless entirely her own person. I defended the Colonial Union, and in doing so I believed I was keeping humanity alive in the universe.

At the end of it the Colonial Defense Forces took the part of me that had always been me and stuffed it into a third and final body. This body was young, but not nearly as quick and strong. It was, after all, only human. But this body would not be asked to fight and die. I missed being as strong as a cartoon superhero. I didn't miss every alien creature I met trying very hard to kill me. It was a fair trade.

The next world is likely unknown to you. Stand again on Earth, our old home, where billions still live and dream of the stars. Look up in the sky, at the constellation Lynx, hard by Ursa Major. There's a star there, yellow like our sun, with six major planets. The third one, appropriately enough, is a counterfeit of Earth: 96 percent of its circumference, but with a slightly larger iron core, so it has 101 percent of its mass (you don't notice that 1 percent much). Two moons: one two-thirds the size of Earth's moon, but closer than Luna, so in the sky it takes up the same amount of real estate. The second moon, a captured asteroid, is much smaller and closer in. It's in an unstable orbit; eventually it will tumble and fall into the planet below. Best estimate is this will happen in about a quarter of a million years. The natives are not terribly concerned at the moment.

This world was found by humans nearly seventy-five years ago; the Ealan had a colony there but the Colonial Defense Forces corrected that. Then the Ealan, shall we say, checked the math on that equation and it was another couple of years before it was all sorted out. When it was, the Colonial Union opened the world to colonists from Earth, mostly from India. They arrived in waves; the first one after the planet was secured from the Ealan, and the second shortly after the Subcontinental War on Earth, when the Occupation-backed probationary government offered the most notable supporters of the Chowdhury regime the choice of colonization or imprisonment. Most went into exile, taking their families with them. These people didn't so much dream of the stars as had them forced upon them.

Given the people who live on the planet, you would think it would have a name that reflects their heritage. You would be wrong. The planet is called Huckleberry, named no doubt by some Twain-loving apparatchik of the Colonial Union. Huckleberry's large moon is Sawyer; the small one is Becky. Its three major continents are Samuel, Langhorne and Clemens; from Clemens there is a long, curling string of volcanic islands known as the Livy Archipelago, set in the Calaveras Ocean. Most of the prominent features were dubbed in various aspects Twainania before the first settlers arrived; they seem to have accepted this with good grace.

Stand on this planet with me now. Look up in the sky, in the direction of the constellation Lotus. In it there is a star, yellow like the one this planet circles, around which I was born, two other lives ago. From here it is so far away as to be invisible to the eye, which is often how I feel about the life I lived there.

My name is John Perry. I am eighty-eight years old. I have lived on this planet for nearly eight years now. It is my home, which I share with my wife and my adopted daughter. Welcome to Huckleberry. In this story, it's the next world I leave behind. But not the final one.

The story of how I left Huckleberry begins—as do all worthy stories—with a goat.

Savitri Guntupalli, my assistant, didn't even look up from her book as I came back from lunch. "There's a goat in your office," she said.

"Hmmmm," I said. "I thought we'd sprayed for those."

This got an upward glance, which counted as a victory as these things go. "It brought the Chengelpet brothers with it," she said.

"Crap," I said. The last pair of brothers who fought as much as the Chengelpet brothers were named Cain and Abel, and at least one of them finally took some direct action. "I thought I told you not to let those two in my office when I wasn't around."

"You said no such thing," Savitri said.

"Let's make it a standing order," I said.

"And even if you had," Savitri continued, setting down her book, "this assumes that either Chengelpet would listen to me, which neither would. Aftab stomped through first with the goat and Nissim followed right after. Neither of them so much as looked in my direction."

"I don't want to have to deal with the Chengelpets," I said. "I just ate."

Savitri reached over to the side of the desk, grabbed her wastebasket and placed it on top of her desk. "By all means, vomit first," she said.

I had met Savitri several years before while I was touring the colonies as a representative of the Colonial Defense Forces, talking it up to the various colonies I was sent to. At the stop in the village of New Goa in the Huckleberry colony, Savitri stood up and called me a tool of the imperial and totalitarian regime of the Colonial Union. I liked her immediately. When I mustered out of the CDF, I decided to settle in New Goa. I was offered the position of village ombudsman, which I took, and was surprised on the first day of work to find Savitri there, telling me that she was going to be my assistant whether I liked it or not.

"Remind me again why you took this job," I said to Savitri, over the wastebasket.

"Sheer perversity," Savitri said. "Are you going to vomit or not?"

"I think I'll keep it in," I said. She grabbed the wastebasket and set it in its former position, and then picked up her book to resume reading.

I had an idea. "Hey, Savitri," I said. "Want my job?"

"Sure," she said, opening her book. "I'll start right after you finish with the Chengelpets."

"Thanks," I said.

Savitri grunted. She had returned to her literary adventures. I steeled myself and walked through the door of my office.

The goat in the middle of the floor was cute. The Chengelpets, sitting in the chairs in front of my desk, were less so.

"Aftab," I said, nodding to the older brother. "Nissim," I said, nodding to the younger. "And friend," I said, nodding to the goat. I took a seat. "What can I do for you this afternoon?"

"You can give me permission to shoot my brother, Ombudsman Perry," Nissim said.

"I'm not sure that's in my job description," I said. "And anyway, it seems a little drastic. Why don't you tell me what's going on."

Nissim pointed to his brother. "This bastard has stolen my seed," he said.

"Pardon?" I said.

"My seed," Nissim said. "Ask him. He cannot deny it."

I blinked and turned toward Aftab. "Stealing your brother's seed, then, is it, Aftab?"

"You must forgive my brother," Aftab said. "He is prone to hysteria, as you know. What he means to say is that one of his goats wandered from his pasture into mine and impregnated this nanny here, and now he claims that I have stolen his goat's sperm."

"It wasn't just any goat," Nissim said. "It was Prabhat, my prizewinner. I stud him out for a very good price, and Aftab didn't want to pay the price. So he stole my seed."

"It's Prabhat's seed, you idiot," Aftab said. "And it's not my fault you take such poor care of your fence that your goat was able to get onto my land."

"Oh, that's rich," Nissim said. "Ombudsman Perry, I'll have you know that fence wire was cut. Prabhat was tempted onto his land."

"You're delusional," Aftab said. "And even if it were true, which it is not, so what? You have your precious Prabhat back."

"But now you have this pregnant goat," Nissim said. "A pregnancy that you did not pay for, and which I did not give permission for. It's

theft, pure and simple. And more than that, you're trying to ruin me."

"What are you talking about?" Aftab said.

"You're trying to breed a new stud," Nissim said to me, and pointed at the goat, which was nibbling the back of Aftab's chair. "Don't deny it. This is your best nanny. By breeding it with Prabhat you'll have a buck you can stud out. You're trying to undercut my business. Ask him, Ombudsman Perry. Ask him what his goat is carrying."

I looked back to Aftab. "What is your goat carrying, Aftab?"

"By sheer coincidence, one of the fetuses is male," Aftab said.

"I want it aborted," Nissim said.

"It's not your goat," Aftab said.

"Then I'll take the kid when it's born," Nissim said. "As payment for the seed you stole."

"This again," Aftab said, and looked over to me. "You see what I am dealing with, Ombudsman Perry. He lets his goats run rampant across the countryside, impregnating at will, and then he demands payment for his own shoddy animal husbandry."

Nissim bellowed in outrage and began yelling and gesticulating wildly at his brother; Aftab followed suit. The goat came around the desk and eyed me curiously. I reached into my desk and fed the goat a candy I found there. "You and I don't actually need to be here for this," I said to the goat. The goat didn't respond, but I could tell she agreed with me.

As originally planned, the village ombudsman's job was supposed to be simple: Whenever the New Goa villagers had a problem with the local or district government, they would come to me, and I could help them run through the red tape and get things done. It was, in fact, just the sort of job you give a war hero who is otherwise useless to the daily life of a largely rural colony; he's got just enough notoriety with the higher-ups that when he shows up on the doorstep, they have to pay attention to him.

The thing was that after a couple of months of this, the New Goa villagers started coming to me with their other problems. "Oh, we don't want to bother with the officials," I was told by one of the villagers, after I questioned why I was suddenly the go-to guy for

everything from farm equipment advice to frontline marriage counseling. “It’s easier and quicker to come to you.” Rohit Kulkarni, New Goa’s administrator, was delighted with this state of affairs, since I was now handling the problems that used to come to him first. It gave him more time to fish and play dominoes at the tea shop.

Most of the time this new and expanded definition of my ombudsman’s duties was perfectly fine. It was nice to help people, and it was also nice that people listened to my advice. On the other hand any public servant is likely to tell you that just a few annoying people in their community will take up the vast majority of their time. In New Goa, those roles were occupied by the Chengelpet brothers.

No one knew why they hated each other so much. I thought it might be something with their parents, but Bhajan and Niral were lovely people who were just as mystified about it as anyone. Some people just don’t get along with some other people, and unfortunately, these two people who did not get along happened to be brothers.

It wouldn’t have been so bad if in fact they hadn’t built farms right next to each other and thus were in each other’s faces and business most of the time. At one point early in my tenure I suggested to Aftab, whom I regarded as the slightly more rational Chengelpet, that he might consider checking out a new plot of land that had just been cleared out on the other side of the village, because living away from Nissim might solve the majority of his problems with him. “Oh, he’d like that,” Aftab said, in a perfectly reasonable tone of voice. After that I abandoned any hope of rational discourse on the matter and accepted that my karma required me to suffer through the occasional visit from the Outraged Chengelpet Brothers.

“All right,” I said, quieting the brothers down from their fratriphobic rantings. “Here’s what I think. I don’t think it really matters how our lady friend the goat got knocked up, so let’s not focus on that. But you both agree that it was Nissim’s buck that did the deed.”

Both the Chengelpets nodded; the goat stayed modestly quiet. “Fine. Then the two of you are in business together,” I said. “Aftab, you can keep the kid after it’s born and stud it out if you like. But the

first six times you do, Nissim gets the full stud fee, and after that half of your stud fee goes to your brother."

"He'll just stud it out for free the first six times," Nissim said.

"Then let's make the stud fee after those first six times the average of those first six," I said. "So if he tries to screw you he'll end up screwing himself, too. And this is a small village, Nissim. People here won't stud with Aftab if they think the only reason he's hiring out his goat is to mess with your livelihood. There's a fine line between value and being a bad neighbor."

"And what if I don't want to be in business with him?" Aftab said.

"Then you can sell the kid to Nissim," I said. Nissim opened his mouth to protest. "Yes, sell," I said, before he could complain. "Take the kid to Murali and get an appraisal. That'll be the price. Murali doesn't like either of you very much so you'll get a fair estimate. Okay?"

The Chengelpets thought it over, which is to say they racked their brains to see if there was any way either one of them was more unhappy with this state of affairs than the other. Eventually they both seemed to come to the conclusion that they were equally displeased, which in this situation was the optimal result. They both nodded their assent.

"Good," I said. "Now get out of here before there's a mess on my rug."

"My goat wouldn't do that," Aftab said.

"It's not the goat I'm worried about," I said, shooing them out. They left; Savitri appeared in the door.

"You're in my seat," she said, nodding to my chair.

"Screw you," I said, propping up my feet on the desk. "If you're not going to handle the annoying cases, you're not ready for the big chair."

"In that case I will return to my humble role as your assistant and let you know that while you were entertaining the Chengelpets, the constable called," Savitri said.

"What about?" I asked.

"Didn't say," Savitri said. "Hung up. You know the constable. Very abrupt."

"Tough but fair, that's the motto," I said. "If it was really important there'd be a message, so I'll worry about that later. In the meantime I'll catch up with my paperwork."

"You don't have paperwork," Savitri said. "You give it all to me."

"Is it done?" I asked.

"As far as you know, yes," Savitri said.

"Then I think I'll relax and bask in my superior management skills," I said.

"I'm glad you didn't use the wastebasket to vomit earlier," Savitri said. "Because now there's a place for mine to go." She retreated back to her desk before I could think up a good retort.

We'd been like this since after the first month we'd worked together. It took her that first month to get used to the fact that even though I was former military I wasn't actually a colonialist tool, or at the very least if I was, I was one with common sense and a reasonable sense of humor. Having established I wasn't there to spread my hegemony over her village, she relaxed enough to start mocking me. It's been our relationship for seven years, and it's a good one.

With all the paperwork done and all the problems of the village solved, I did what anyone in my position would do: I took a nap. Welcome to the rough and tumble world of colonial village ombudsmanning. It's possible it's done differently elsewhere, but if it is, I don't want to know.

I woke up in time to see Savitiri closing up the office for the day. I waved good-bye to her and after a few more minutes of immobility hauled my own ass out of the chair and through the door, on the way home. Along the way I happened to see the constable coming toward me on the other side of the road. I crossed the road, walked up to the constable and kissed my local law enforcement official full on the lips.

"You know I don't like it when you do that," Jane said, after I was done.

"You don't like it when I kiss you?" I asked.

"Not when I'm on the job," Jane said. "It erodes my authority."

I smiled at the thought of some malfeasant thinking Jane, a former Special Forces soldier, was soft because she kissed her husband. The ass-kicking that would ensue would be terrible in its magnitude.

However, I didn't say that. "Sorry," I said. "I'll try not to erode your authority anymore."

"Thank you," Jane said. "I was coming to see you, anyway, since you didn't return my call."

"I was incredibly busy today," I said.

"Savitri briefed me on just how busy you were when I called back," Jane said.

"Oops," I said.

"Oops," Jane agreed. We started walking in the direction of our home. "What I was going to tell you is that you could expect Gopal Boparai to come by tomorrow to find out what his community service would be. He was drunk and disorderly again. He was yelling at a cow."

"Bad karma," I said.

"The cow thought so, too," Jane said. "It butted him in the chest and sent him through a shop window."

"Is Go okay?" I asked.

"Scratches," Jane said. "The pane popped out. Plastic. Didn't break."

"This is the third time this year," I said. "He should be up in front of the actual magistrate, not me."

"That's what I told him, too," Jane said. "But he'd be up for a mandatory forty days in the district gaol and Shashi is due in a couple of weeks. She needs him around more than he needs gaol."

"All right," I said. "I'll figure out something for him."

"How was your day?" Jane asked. "Besides the nap, I mean."

"I had a Chengelpet day," I said. "This time with a goat."

Jane and I chatted about our day on our walk home, like we do every day on our walk home, to the small farm we keep just outside the village proper. As we turned onto our road we ran into our daughter Zoë, walking Babar the mutt, who was typically deliriously happy to see us.

"He knew you were coming," Zoë said, slightly out of breath. "Took off halfway down the road. Had to run to keep up."

"Nice to know we were missed," I said. Jane petted Babar, who wagged up a storm. I gave Zoë a peck on the cheek.

"You two have a visitor," Zoë said. "He showed up at the house about an hour ago. In a floater."

No one in town had a floater; they were ostentatious and impractical for a farming community. I glanced over to Jane, who shrugged, as if to say, *I'm not expecting anyone*. "Who did he say he was?" I asked.

"He didn't," Zoë said. "All he said was that he was an old friend of yours, John. I told him I could call you and he said he was happy to wait."

"Well, what does he look like, at least?" I asked.

"Young," Zoë said. "Kinda cute."

"I don't think I know any cute guys," I said. "That's more your department, teenage daughter."

Zoë crossed her eyes and gave a mock sneer. "Thanks, ninety-year-old dad. If you had let me finish speaking, you would have heard the clue that tells me you might actually know him. Which is that he's also *green*."

This got another shared glance between me and Jane. CDF members had green skin, a result of modified chlorophyll that gave them extra energy for combat. Both Jane and I had had green skin once; I was back to my original hue and Jane was allowed to choose a more standard skin tone when she changed bodies.

"He didn't say what he wanted?" Jane asked Zoë.

"Nope," Zoë said. "And I didn't ask. I just figured I'd come find you and give you advance warning. I left him on the front porch."

"Probably sneaking around the house by now," I said.

"Doubtful," Zoë said. "I left Hickory and Dickory to watch him."

I grinned. "That should keep him in one place," I said.

"My thought exactly," Zoë said.

"You are wise beyond your years, teenage daughter," I said.

"Makes up for you, ninety-year-old dad," she said. She jogged back to the house, Babar padding behind.

"Such attitude," I said to Jane. "She gets it from your side."

"She's adopted," Jane said. "And I'm not the smart-ass in the family."

"These are details," I said, and took her hand. "Come on. I want to see just how scared shitless our guest is."

We found our guest on the porch swing, watched intently and silently by our two Obin. I recognized him immediately.

"General Rybicki," I said. "This is a surprise."

"Hello, Major," Rybicki said, referring to my former rank. He pointed to the Obin. "You've made some interesting friends since the last time I saw you."

"Hickory and Dickory," I said. "They're my daughter's companions. Perfectly nice, unless they think you're a threat to her."

"And then what happens?" Rybicki asked.

"It varies," I said. "But it's usually quick."

"Wonderful," Rybicki said. I excused the Obin; they went off to find Zoë.

"Thank you," Rybicki said. "Obin make me nervous."

"That's the point," Jane said.

"I realize that," Rybicki said. "If you don't mind me asking, why does your daughter have Obin bodyguards?"

"They're not bodyguards, they're companions," Jane said. "Zoë is our adopted daughter. Her biological father is Charles Boutin." This got a raised eyebrow from Rybicki; he was of sufficiently advanced rank to know about Boutin. "The Obin revere Boutin, but he's dead. They have a desire to know his daughter, so they sent these two to be with her."

"And this doesn't bother her," Rybicki said.

"She grew up with Obin as nannies and protectors," Jane said. "She's comfortable with them."

"And it doesn't bother *you*," Rybicki said.

"They watch and protect Zoë," I said. "They help out around here. And their presence with us is a part of the treaty the Colonial Union has with the Obin. Having them here seems like a small price to pay for having them on our side."

"That's true enough," Rybicki said, and stood up. "Listen, Major. I have a proposition for you." He nodded to Jane. "For both of you, actually."

"What is it?" I asked.

Rybicki motioned with his head toward the house, in the direction Hickory and Dickory just went. "I'd rather not talk about it where those two might hear, if it's all the same. Is there some place we can talk privately?"

I glanced over at Jane. She smiled thinly. "I know a place," she said.

"We're stopping here?" General Rybicki asked as we pulled up short, halfway across the field.

"You asked if we had someplace where we could talk privately," I said. "You've now got at least five acres of grain between us and the next set of ears, human or Obin. Welcome to privacy, colonial style."

"What kind of grain is this?" General Rybicki asked, pulling at a stalk.

"It's sorghum," Jane said, standing next to me. Babar sat next to Jane and scratched his ear.

"It sounds familiar," Rybicki said, "but I don't think I've ever actually seen it before."

"It's a staple crop here," I said. "It's a good crop because it's heat and drought tolerant, and it can get pretty hot around here in our summer months. People here use it for a bread called *bhakri* and for other things."

"Bhakri," Rybicki said, and motioned toward town. "These folks are mostly from India, then."

"Some of them," I said. "Most of them were born here. This particular village is sixty years old. Most of the active colonization here on Huckleberry is on the Clemens continent now. They opened it up around the same time we arrived."

"So there's no tension about the Subcontinental War," Rybicki said. "With you being American and them being Indian."

"It doesn't come up," I said. "People here are like immigrants everywhere. They think of themselves as Huckleberries first and Indians second. In another generation none of it will matter. And Jane's not American, anyway. If we're seen as anything, we're seen as former soldiers. We were a curiosity when we arrived, but now we're just John and Jane, with the farm down the road."

Rybicki looked at the field again. "I'm surprised you farm at all," he said. "The two of you have real jobs."

"Farming is a real job," Jane said. "Most of our neighbors do it. It's good for us to do it too so we can understand them and what they need from us."

"I meant no offense," Rybicki said.

"None taken," I said, interjecting myself back into the conversation. I motioned to the field. "We've got about forty acres here. It's not a lot—and not enough to take money away from the other farmers—but it's enough to make the point that the concerns of New Goa are our concerns, too. We've worked hard to become New Goans and Huckleberries ourselves."

General Rybicki nodded and looked at his sorghum stalk. As Zoë had noted, he was green, good-looking and young. Or at least gave the appearance of youth, thanks to the CDF body he still had. He'd look twenty-three years old for as long as he had it, even though his real age was some number over one hundred by now. He looked younger than me, and I was his junior by fifteen years or more. But then, when I left the service, I traded my CDF body for a new, unmodified body based on my original DNA. I looked at least thirty by now. I could live with that.

At the time I had left the CDF, Rybicki had been my superior officer, but he and I went back before that. I met him on my first day of combat, back when he was a lieutenant colonel and I had been a private. He'd offhandedly called me *son*, as a reference to my youth. I was seventy-five at the time.

This was one of the problems with the Colonial Defense Forces: all that body engineering they do really messes with your age sense. I was in my nineties; Jane, born an adult as part of the CDF Special Forces, was sixteen or so. It can hurt your head if you think about it.

"It's time you tell us why you're here, General," Jane said. Seven years of living with naturally-occuring humans had not blunted her Special Forces-bred way of ramming through social courtesies and getting right to the point.

Rybicki grinned wryly, and tossed his sorghum to the ground. "All right," he said. "After you left the service, Perry, I got a promotion and

a transfer. I'm with the Department of Colonization now; the folks who have the job of seeding and supporting new colonies."

"You're still CDF," I said. "It's the green skin that gives you away. I thought the Colonial Union kept its civilian and military wings separate."

"I'm the liaison," Rybicki said. "I get to keep things coordinated between the both of them. This is about as fun as you might think it is."

"You have my sympathy," I said.

"Thank you, Major," Rybicki said. It'd been years since anyone referred to me by my rank. "I do appreciate it. The reason I'm here is because I was wondering if you—the two of you—would do a job for me."

"What kind of job?" Jane asked.

Rybicki looked over to Jane. "Lead a new colony," he said.

Jane glanced over to me. I could tell she didn't like this idea already. "Isn't that what the Department of Colonization is for?" I asked. "It should be filled with all sorts of people whose job it is to lead colonies."

"Not this time," Rybicki said. "This colony is different."

"How?" Jane said.

"The Colonial Union gets colonists from Earth," Rybicki said. "But over the last few years the colonies—the *established* colonies, like Phoenix and Elysium and Kyoto—have been pushing the CU to let their people form new colonies. Folks from those places have made the attempt before with wildcat colonies, but you know how those go."

I nodded. Wildcat colonies were illegal and unauthorized. The CU turned a blind eye to wildcatters; the rationale was that the people who were in them would otherwise be causing trouble at home, so it was just as well to let them go. But a wildcat colony was well and truly on its own; unless one of your colonists was the kid of someone high up in the government, the CDF wouldn't be coming when you called for help. The survival statistics for wildcat colonies were impressively grim. Most didn't last six months. Other colonizing species generally did them in. It wasn't a forgiving universe.

Rybicki caught my acknowledgment and went on. "The CU would prefer the colonies keep to their own knitting, but it's become a political issue and the CU can't brush it off anymore. So the DoC

suggested that we open up one planet for second-generation colonists. You can guess what happened then."

"The colonies started clawing each other's eyes out to be the one whose people got to colonize," I said.

"Give the man a cigar," Rybicki said. "So the DoC tried to play Solomon by saying that each of the agitants could contribute a limited number of colonists to the first wave colony. So now we have a seed colony of about twenty-five hundred people, with two hundred and fifty from ten different colonies. But now we don't have anyone to lead them. None of the colonies want the other colonies' people in charge."

"There are more than ten colonies," I said. "You could recruit your colony leaders from one of those."

"Theoretically that would work," Rybicki said. "In the real universe, however, the other colonies are pissed off that they didn't get *their* people on the colony roster. We've promised that if this colony works out we'll entertain the idea of opening other worlds. But for now it's a mess and no one else is inclined to play along."

"Who was the idiot who suggested this plan in the first place?" Jane asked.

"As it happens, that idiot was me," Rybicki said.

"Well done," Jane said. I reflected on the fact it was a good thing she wasn't still in the military.

"Thank you, Constable Sagan," General Rybicki said. "I appreciate the candor. Clearly there were aspects of this plan I didn't expect. But then, that's why I'm here."

"The flaw with this plan of yours—aside from the fact that neither Jane nor I have the slightest idea how to run a seed colony—is that we're colonists now, too," I said. "We've been here for nearly eight years."

"But you said it yourself: you're former soldiers," Rybicki said. "Former soldiers are a category all their own. You're not really from Huckleberry. You're from Earth, and she's former Special Forces, which means she's not from anywhere. No offense," he said to Jane.

"That still leaves the problem of neither of us having any experience running a seed colony," I said. "When I was doing my public relations tour of the colonies way back when, I went to a seed colony on Orton.

Those people never stopped working. You don't just throw people into that situation without training."

"You *have* training," Rybicki said. "Both of you were officers. Christ, Perry, you were a major. You commanded a regiment of three thousand soldiers across a battle group. That's larger than a seed colony."

"A colony isn't a military regiment," I said.

"No it's not," Rybicki agreed. "But the same skills are required. And since you've been discharged, both of you have worked in colony administration. You're an ombudsman—you know how a colony government works and how to get things done. Your wife is the constable here and is responsible for maintaining order. Between the two of you, you have pretty much all the skills you'll need. I didn't just pull your names out of a hat, Major. These are the reasons I thought of you. You're about eighty-five percent ready to go as it is, and we'll get you the rest of the way there before the colonists head for Roanoke. That's the name we've chosen for the colony," he added.

"We have a life here," Jane said. "We have jobs and responsibilities, and we have a daughter who has her own life here as well. You're casually asking us to uproot ourselves to solve your little political crisis."

"Well, I apologize about the casual part," Rybicki said. "Normally you would have gotten this request by Colonial diplomatic courier, along with a full load of documents. But as it happened, I was on Huckleberry for entirely different reasons and thought I would kill two birds with one stone. I honestly didn't expect I'd be pitching you this idea standing in the middle of a field of sorghum."

"All right," Jane said.

"And as for it being a little political crisis, you're wrong about that," Rybicki said. "It's a medium-sized political crisis, on its way to becoming a large one. This has become more than just another human colony. The local planetary governments and press have built this up as the biggest colonization event since humans first left Earth. It's not—trust me on that—but that fact doesn't really matter at this point. It's become a media circus and a political headache, and it's put the DoC on

the defensive. This colony is getting away from us because so many others have a vested interest in it. We need to get on top of it again."

"So it's all about politics," I said.

"No," Rybicki said. "You misunderstand me. The DoC doesn't need to get back on top of this because we're counting political coup. We need to get back on top of this because *this is a human colony*. You both know what it's like out there. Colonies live or die—*colonists* live or die—based on how well we prepare and defend them. The DoC's job is to get the colonists as prepared as we can get them before they colonize. The CDF's job is to keep them safe until they get a foothold. If either side of that equation breaks down, that colony is screwed.

"Right now, the department's side of the equation isn't working because we haven't provided the leadership, and everyone else is trying to keep anyone else from filling the vacuum. We're running out of time to make it work. Roanoke is going to happen. The question is whether we manage to do it right. If we don't—if Roanoke dies—there's going to be hell to pay. So it's better that we do it right."

"If this is such a political hot potato, I don't see why throwing us into the mix is going to help things," I said. "There's no guarantee anyone will be happy with us."

"Like I said, I didn't just pull your names out of a hat," Rybicki said. "Over at the department we ran a slate of potential candidates that would work for us and would work for the CDF. We figured if the two of us could sign off on someone, we could make the colony governments accept them. You two were on the list."

"Where on the list?" Jane asked.

"About halfway down," Rybicki said. "Sorry. The other candidates didn't work out."

"Well, it's an honor just to be nominated," I said.

Rybicki grinned. "I never did like your sarcasm, Perry," he said. "I understand I'm dropping a lot on you at once. I don't expect you to give me an answer now. I have all the documents here," he tapped his temple, signifying he'd stored the information in his BrainPal, "so if you have a PDA I can send them to, you can take a look at them at your leisure. As long as your leisure is no longer than a standard week."

"You're asking us to walk away from everything here," Jane said again.

"Yes," Rybicki said. "I am. And I'm appealing to your sense of duty, too, since I know you have one. The Colonial Union needs smart, capable and experienced people to help us get this colony going. You two fit the bill. And what I'm asking of you is more important than what you're doing here. Your jobs here can be handled by others. You'll leave and someone else will come in and take your place. Maybe they won't be as good, but they'll be good enough. What I'm asking of you two for this colony isn't something that just anyone else could do."

"You said we were in the middle of your list," I said.

"It was a short list," Rybicki said to me. "And there's a steep drop-off after you two." He turned back to Jane. "Look, Sagan, I can see this is a tough sell for you. I'll make you a deal. This is going to be a seed colony. That means that the first wave gets in and spends two or three years preparing the place for the next wave. After the second wave comes in, things will probably be settled enough that if you want, you and Perry and your daughter can come back here. The DoC can make sure your house and jobs will be waiting for you. Hell, we'll even send someone to get in your crop."

"Don't patronize me, General," Jane said.

"I'm not," Rybicki said. "The offer is genuine, Sagan. Your life here, every part of it, will be waiting for you. You won't lose any of it. But I need the two of you *now*. The DoC will make it worth your while. You'll get this life back. And you'll be making sure Roanoke colony survives. Think about it. Just decide soon."

I woke up and Jane wasn't beside me; I found her standing in the road in front of our house, staring up at the stars.

"You're going to get hit, standing in the road like that," I said, coming up behind her, and placing my hands on her shoulders.

"There's nothing to get hit by," Jane said, taking my left hand in hers. "There's hardly anything to get hit by during the day. Look at them," she pointed to the stars with her right hand, and began tracing out constellations. "Look. The crane. The lotus. The pearl."

"I have a hard time with the Huckleberry constellations," I said. "I keep looking for the ones I was born with. I look up and some part of me still expects to see the Big Dipper or Orion."

"I never looked at stars before we came here," Jane said. "I mean, I saw them, but they didn't mean anything to me. They were just stars. Then we came here and I spent all that time learning these constellations."

"I remember," I said. And I did remember; Vikram Banerje, who had been an astronomer back on Earth, had been a frequent visitor to our house in our first years in New Goa, patiently tracing out the patterns in the sky for Jane. He died not too long after he finally taught her all the Huckleberry constellations.

"I didn't see them at first," Jane said.

"The constellations?" I asked.

Jane nodded. "Vikram would point them out to me, and I'd just see a clump of stars," she said. "He'd show me a map and I'd see how the stars were supposed to connect together, and then I'd look up at the sky and just see . . . stars. And it was like that for a long time. And then one night, I remember walking home from work and looking up and saying to myself 'there's the crane,' and seeing it. Seeing the crane. Seeing the constellations. That's when I knew this place was my home. That's when I knew I had come here to stay. That this place was *my* place."

I slid my arms down Jane's body and held her around the waist.

"But this place isn't your place, is it?" Jane asked.

"My place is where you are," I said.

"You know what I mean," Jane said.

"I know what you mean," I said. "I like it here, Jane. I like the people. I like our life."

"But," Jane said.

I shrugged.

Jane felt it. "That's what I thought," she said.

"I'm not unhappy," I said.

"I didn't say you were," Jane said. "And I know you're not unhappy with me or Zoë. If General Rybicki hadn't shown up, I don't think you would have noticed that you're ready to move on."

I nodded and kissed the back of her head. She was right about that.

"I talked to Zoë about it," Jane said.

"What did she have to say about it?" I asked.

"She's like you," Jane said. "She likes it here, but this isn't her home. She likes the idea of going to a colony that's just starting out."

"It appeals to her sense of adventure," I said.

"Maybe," Jane said. "There's not a lot of adventure here. That's one thing I like about it."

"That's funny coming from a Special Forces soldier," I said.

"I say it because I *am* Special Forces," Jane said. "I had nine years of nonstop adventure. I was born into it and if it wasn't for you and Zoë I would have died in it, and not had anything else. Adventure is overrated."

"But you're thinking of having some more anyway," I said.

"Because you are," Jane said.

"We haven't decided anything," I said. "We could say no. This is your place."

" 'My place is where you are,' " Jane said, echoing me. "This *is* my place. But maybe somewhere else could be, too. I've only had this one place. Maybe I'm just frightened of leaving it."

"I don't think you're frightened by much," I said.

"I'm frightened by different things than you are," Jane said. "You don't notice because sometimes you're not too observant."

"Thanks," I said. We stood there in the road, entwined.

"We can always come back," Jane said, eventually.

"Yes," I said. "If you want."

"We'll see," Jane said. She leaned back to kiss my cheek, untangled herself from my grasp and began to walk down the road. I turned back toward the house.

"Stay with me," Jane said.

"All right," I said. "I'm sorry. I thought you wanted to be by yourself."

"No," Jane said. "Walk with me. Let me show you my constellations. We have time enough for that."

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TWO

The *Junipero Serra* skipped and suddenly a green and blue world hovered large outside the window of the *Serra*'s observation theater. In the seats, a couple hundred invited guests, reporters and Department of Colonization officials oohed and aahed as if they'd never seen a planet from the outside before.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Karin Bell, Secretary of Colonization, "the new colony world of Roanoke." The room burst into applause, which faded into the hiss of reporters quickly whispering notes into recorders. In doing so most of them missed the sudden appearance in the middle distance of the *Bloomington* and the *Fairbanks*, the two CDF cruisers that were accompanying this little press junket in the stars. Their presence suggested to me that Roanoke might not be as entirely domesticated as the Colonial Union would like to suggest; it wouldn't do to have the Secretary of Colonization—not to mention the aforementioned reporters and invited guests—blown out of the sky by some alien raider.

I noted the appearance of the cruiser to Jane with a flick of my eyes; she glanced and nodded almost imperceptibly. Neither of us said anything. We were hoping to get through this entire press thing without having to say anything. We had discovered that neither of us were particularly good with the press.

"Let me give you just a little background on Roanoke," Bell said. "Roanoke has an equatorial diameter of just under thirteen thousand kilometers, which means it's larger than either Earth or Phoenix, but

not as large as Zhong Guo, which retains the title the CU's largest colonized planet." This prompted a halfhearted cheer from a couple of Zhong Guo reporters, followed by a laugh. "Its size and composition means the gravity is ten percent heavier here than on Phoenix; most of you will feel like you've put on a kilo or two when you go down. The atmosphere is the usual nitrogen-oxygen mix, but it's unusually heavy on the oxygen: close to thirty percent. You'll feel that, too."

"Who did we take the planet from?" asked one of the reporters.

"I'm not there yet," Bell said, and there was a little grumbling. Bell was apparently known for giving dry press conferences off notes, and she was in fine form here.

The image of Roanoke's globe disappeared, replaced with a delta, in which a small river joined in with a much larger one. "This is where the colony will settle," Bell said. "The smaller river here we've named the Ablemare; the larger one here is the Raleigh. Raleigh drains this entire continent, like the Amazon does back on Earth or the Anasazi does on Phoenix. A couple hundred kilometers to the west"—the image scrolled—"and we're at the Virginian Ocean. Plenty of room to grow."

"Why isn't the colony at the shore?" someone asked.

"Because it doesn't have to be," Bell said. "This isn't the sixteenth century. Our ships are crossing stars, not oceans. We can put colonies in places where it makes sense for them to be. This place"—Bell rewound to the original location—"is far enough inland to be insulated from the cyclones that hit at the mouth of the Raleigh, and has other favorable geological and meteorological advantages as well. Also, the life on this planet has incompatible chemistry to ours. The colonists can't eat anything from here. Fishing is out. It makes more sense to put the colony on an alluvial plain, where it has space to grow its own food, than it does on a coast."

"Can we talk about who we took the planet from yet?" asked the first reporter.

"I'm not there yet," Bell repeated.

"But we know all this stuff already," said someone else. "It's in our press packs. And our viewers are going to want to know who we took the planet from."

"We didn't take the planet from anyone," Bell said, clearly annoyed at being knocked off her pace. "We were given the planet."

"By whom?" asked the first reporter.

"By the Obin," Bell said. This caused a stir. "And I'll be happy to talk about that more, later. But first—" The image of the river delta vanished, replaced by some furry tree-like objects that weren't quite plants, not quite animals, but were the dominant life form on Roanoke. Most of the reporters ignored her, whispering into their recorders about the Obin connection.

"The Obin called it Garsinhir," General Rybicki had said to me and Jane a few days earlier, as we took his personal shuttle from our transport to Phoenix Station for our formal briefing, and to be introduced to some of the colonists who would act as our deputies. "It means *seventeenth planet*. It was the seventeenth planet they colonized. They're not a very imaginative species."

"It's not like the Obin to give up a planet," Jane said.

"They didn't," Rybicki said. "We traded. We gave them a small planet we took from the Gelta about a year back. They didn't have much use for Garsinhir anyway. It's a class-six planet. The chemistry of the life there is similar enough to the Obin's that the Obin were always dying off from native viruses. We humans, on the other hand, are incompatible with the local life chemistry. So we won't be affected by the local viruses and bacteria and whatnot. The Gelta planet the Obin are taking isn't as nice but they can tolerate it better. It's a fair trade. Now, have you two had a chance to look at the colonist files?"

"We did," I said.

"Any thoughts?" Rybicki said.

"Yes," Jane said. "The selection process is insane."

Rybicki smiled at Jane. "One day you're going to be diplomatic and I'm not going to know what to do," he said.

Jane reached for her PDA and pulled up the information on the selection process. "The colonists from Elysium were selected from a lottery," she said.

"A lottery they could join after proving they were physically capable of the rigors of colonization," Rybicki said.

"Kyoto's colonists are all members of a religious order that avoids technology," Jane said. "How are they even going to get on the colony ships?"

"They're Colonial Mennonites," Rybicki said. "They're not whackjobs, and they're not extremists. They just strive for simplicity. That's not a bad thing to have on a new colony."

"The colonists from Umbria were selected through a *game show*," Jane said.

"The ones that didn't win got the take-home game," I said.

Rybicki ignored me. "Yes," he said, to Jane. "A game show that required the contestants to compete in several tests of endurance and intelligence, both of which will also come in handy when you get to Roanoke. Sagan, every colony was given a list of physical and mental criteria that every potential Roanoke colonist had to fulfill. Other than that we left the selection process up to the colony. Some of them, like Erie and Zhong Guo, did fairly standard selection processes. Some of them didn't."

"And this doesn't cause you any concern," Jane said.

"Not as long as the colonists passed our own set of requirements, no," Rybicki said. "They presented their potential colonists; we checked them against our own standards."

"They all passed?" I asked.

Rybicki snorted. "Hardly. The Albion colony leader chose colonists from her enemies list, and the colonist positions on Rus went to the highest bidder. We ended up supervising the selection process on both those colonies. But the end result is that you have what I think is an excellent class of colonists." He turned to Jane. "They're a damn sight better than colonists you're going to get from Earth, I'll tell you that much. We don't screen *them* nearly as rigorously. Our philosophy there is that if you can walk onto a colony transport, you're in. Our standards are a little higher for this colony. So relax. You've got good colonists."

Jane settled back, not entirely convinced. I didn't blame her; I wasn't entirely convinced myself. The three of us fell silent as the

shuttle negotiated the terms of docking at the gate.

"Where's your daughter?" Rybicki said, as the shuttle settled in.

"She's back at New Goa," Jane said. "Supervising our packing."

"And having a good-bye party with her friends that it's best we not think too much about," I said.

"Teenagers," Rybicki said. He stood up. "Now, Perry, Sagan. Remember what I said about this colony process having become a media circus?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good," he said. "Then prepare to meet the clowns." And then he led us off the shuttle to the gate, where apparently the entire news media of the Colonial Union had camped out to meet us.

"Holy God," I said, stopping in the tunnel.

"It's too late to panic, Perry," Rybicki said, reaching back and taking my arm. "They already know everything about you. Might as well come out and get it over with."

"So," Jann Kranjic said, sidling up to me not more than five minutes after we had landed on Roanoke. "What's it like to be one of the first humans to set foot on a new world?"

"I've done it before," I said, toeing the turf under my boot. I didn't look at him. Over the last few days I'd come to loathe his smooth vocal delivery and telegenic good looks.

"Sure," Jann said. "But this time you don't have anyone trying to shoot that foot off."

Now I glanced over to him and saw that annoying smirk of his, which was somehow regarded as a winning smile on his home world of Umbria. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Beata Novik, his camerawoman, do her slow perambulation. She was letting that camera cap of hers record everything, the better to be edited down later.

"It's still early in the day, Jann. There's still time for someone to get shot," I said. His smiled faltered slightly. "Now, why don't you and Beata go bother someone else."

Kranjic sighed and broke character. "Look, Perry," he said. "You know that when I go in to edit with this there's no way you're not

going to look like a jerk. You should just lighten the tone a little, hey? Give me something I can work with. We really want to work the war hero thing, but you're not giving me much. Come on. You know how this goes. You did advertising back on Earth, for God's sake."

I waved him off, irritably. Kranjic looked over to my right at Jane, but didn't try to get a comment out of her. At some point when I wasn't looking, he had crossed some sort of line with her and I suspect she ended up scaring the hell out of him. I wondered if there was any video of the moment. "Come on, Beata," he said. "We need some more footage of Trujillo, anyway." They wandered off in the direction of the landing craft, looking for one of the more quotable future colony leaders.

Kranjic made me grumpy. This whole trip was making me grumpy. This was ostensibly a research trip for me and Jane and selected colonists, to recon our colony site and to learn more about the planet. What it really was was a press junket with all of us as the stars. It was a waste of time to drag us all to this world just for a photo opportunity, and then drag us all back home. Kranjic was just the most annoying example of the sort of thinking that valued appearance over substance.

I turned to Jane. "I'm not going to miss him when we start this colony."

"You didn't read the colonist profiles close enough," Jane said. "Both he and Beata are part of the Umbrian colonist contingent. He's coming with us. He and Beata got married to do it because the Umbrians weren't letting singles colonize."

"Because married couples are more prepared for colonial life?" I ventured.

"More like couples competing made for better entertainment on that game show of theirs," Jane said.

"He competed on the show?" I asked.

"He was the emcee," Jane said. "But rules are rules. It's entirely a marriage of convenience. Kranjic hasn't ever had a relationship that's lasted more than a year, and Beata is a lesbian in any event."

"I'm terrified you know all this," I said.

"I was an intelligence officer," Jane said. "This is easy for me."

"Anything else I need to know about him?" I asked.

"His plan is to document the first year of the Roanoke colony," Jane said. "He's already signed for a weekly show. He's also got a book deal."

"Lovely," I said. "Well, at least now we know how he weaseled his way onto the shuttle." The first shuttle down to Roanoke was meant to be only the dozen colonist representatives and a few Department of Colonization staffers; there was a near riot when the reporters on the *Serra* figured out that none of them was invited on the shuttle with the colonists. Kranjic broke the deadlock by offering to put the footage Beata shot into the pool. The rest of the reporters would come down in later shuttles, to do their establishing shots and then to cut to Kranjic's material. For his sake it was just as well he was going to become a Roanoke colonist; after this some of his more resentful colleagues would be likely to walk him to an air lock.

"Don't worry about it," Jane said. "And besides, he was right. This *is* the first new planet you've been on where someone wasn't trying to kill you. Enjoy it. Come on." She started walking across the vast expanse of native grasses we had landed on, toward a line of what looked like—but weren't exactly—trees. For that matter, the native grasses weren't exactly grasses, either.

Whatever they were precisely, not-grasses and not-trees both, they were a lush and impossible green. The extra-rich atmosphere lay moist and heavy on us. It was late winter in this hemisphere, but where we were on the planet, latitude and prevailing wind patterns conspired to make the temperature pleasantly warm. I was worried what midsummer was going to be like; I expected I was going to be perspiring a lot.

I caught up with Jane, who had stopped to study a tree thing. It didn't have leaves, it had fur. The fur seemed to be moving; I leaned in closer and saw a colony of tiny creatures bustling about in it.

"Tree fleas," I said. "Nice."

Jane smiled, which was rare enough to note. "I think it's interesting," she said, petting a bough of the tree. One of the tree fleas jumped from the fur to her hand; she looked at it with interest before blowing it off her with a gust of breath.

"Think you could be happy here?" I asked.

"I think I could be *busy* here," Jane said. "General Rybicki can say what he wants about the selection process for this colony. I've read the colonist files. I'm not convinced most of these colonists aren't going to be a danger to themselves and others." She nodded in the direction of the shuttle, where we last saw Kranjic. "Look at Kranjic. He doesn't want to colonize. He wants to write about other people colonizing. He's under the impression that once we get here he's going to have all the time in the world to do his show and write his book. He's going to get to the edge of starvation before he figures it out."

"Maybe he's an outlier," I said.

"You're an optimist," Jane said, and looked back at the fur tree, and the crawly things in it. "I like that about you. But I don't think we should operate from an optimistic point of view."

"Fair enough," I said. "But you have to admit you were wrong about the Mennonites."

"I'm *provisionally* wrong about the Mennonites," Jane said, looking back to me. "But, yes. They're much stronger candidates than I expected."

"You just never knew any Mennonites," I said.

"I never knew any religious people at all before I got to Huckleberry," Jane said. "And Hinduism didn't do much for me. Although I can appreciate Shiva."

"I'll bet," I said. "That's a little different than being a Mennonite, though."

Jane looked up over my shoulder. "Speak of the devil," she said. I turned and saw a tall, pale figure coming toward us. Simple clothes and a wide hat. It was Hiram Yoder, who had been chosen by the Colonial Mennonites to accompany us on the trip.

I smiled at his form. Unlike Jane, I *did* know Mennonites—the part of Ohio I had lived in had a lot of them, as well as Amish, Brethren and other variations of Anabaptists. Like all sorts of folks, individual Mennonites had the usual range of personalities, but as a class they seemed to be good and honest people. When I needed work done on my house I'd always picked Mennonite contractors because they would do the job right the first time, and if something didn't turn out right,

they didn't argue with you about it; they'd just fix it. That's a philosophy worth getting behind.

Yoder raised his hand in welcome. "I thought I'd join you," he said. "I figure if the leaders of the colony are looking so intently at something, I might want to know what it is."

"It's just a tree," I said. "Or, well, whatever it is we end up calling this thing."

Yoder looked up at it. "Appears to be a tree to me," he said. "With fur. We might call it a fur tree."

"Just my thinking," I said. "Not to be confused with a *fir* tree, of course."

"Of course," Yoder said. "That would be silly."

"What do you think of your new world?" I asked.

"I think it could be a good one," Yoder said. "Although much will depend on the people in it."

"I agree," I said. "Which brings me to a question I'd meant to ask you. Some of the Mennonites I knew in Ohio kept to themselves—would separate themselves from the world. I need to know if your group will do the same."

Yoder smiled. "No, Mr. Perry," he said. "Mennonites vary in how we practice our faith, from church to church. We are Colonial Mennonites. We choose to live and dress simply. We don't shun technology when it's required, but we don't use it when it's not. And we choose to live *in* the world, as the salt and the light. We hope to be good neighbors to you and the other colonists, Mr. Perry."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said. "Looks like our colony is off to a promising start."

"That could change," Jane said, and nodded off toward the distance again. Kranjic and Beata were heading our way. Kranjic was moving animatedly; Beata was moving at a distinctly more sluggish pace. Chasing after colonists all day was clearly not her idea of fun.

"There you are," Kranjic said to Yoder. "I have comments from every other colonist here—well, except for her," he waved in the direction of Jane. "And now I just need something from you to put into the pool stock."

"I've told you before, Mr. Kranjic, that I would prefer not to be photographed or interviewed," Yoder said, pleasantly.

"This is a religious thing, isn't it," Kranjic said.

"Not really," Yoder said. "I'd just prefer to be let alone."

"The folks back on Kyoto are going to be disappointed if they don't see their hometown . . ." Kranjic stopped, and stared behind all three of us. "What the hell are those?"

We turned, slowly, to see two deer-sized creatures about five meters into the fur trees, eyeing us placidly.

"Jane?" I asked.

"I have no idea," Jane said. "There's not a whole lot on the local fauna in our reports."

"Beata," Kranjic said. "Go get closer so we can get a better shot."

"The hell I will," Beata said. "I'm not going to get eaten so *you* can get a better shot."

"Oh, come on," Kranjic said. "If they were going to eat us they would have done it by now. Look." He started to inch closer to the things.

"Should we let him do that?" I asked Jane.

Jane shrugged. "We haven't technically started the colony yet."

"Good point," I said.

Kranjic had snuck up to within a couple meters of the pair when the larger of the two decided it had had enough, bellowed impressively, and took a quick step forward. Kranjic shrieked and took off like a shot, nearly stumbling as he sprinted back toward the shuttle.

I turned to Beata. "Tell me you got that," I said.

"You know I did," she said.

The two creatures in the trees, their work done, sauntered casually away.

"Wow," Savitri said. "It's not every day that you get to see a major colonial news figure wet himself in fear."

"This is true," I said. "Although to be entirely honest I'm pretty sure I could have gone my entire life without having seen that and still died happy."

"Then it's just a bonus," Savitri said.

We were sitting in my office on the day before my final departure from Huckleberry. Savitri was sitting in the chair behind my desk; I was sitting in one of the chairs in front of it.

"How do you like the view from the chair?" I asked.

"The view is fine. The chair is kind of lumpy," Savitri said. "Like someone's lazy ass had deformed it beyond all recognition."

"You can always get a new chair," I said.

"Oh, I'm sure Administrator Kulkarni would be delighted with that expense," Savitri said. "He's never gotten over the idea of me as a troublemaker."

"You *are* a troublemaker," I said. "It's part of the job description of being an ombudsman."

"Ombudsmen are supposed to resolve trouble," Savitri noted.

"Well, fine," I said. "If you want to get snippy about it, Miss Literal Pants."

"What a lovely name," Savitiri said, and swung back and forth in her chair. "And anyway, I'm only an assistant troublemaker."

"Not anymore," I said. "I've already recommended to Kulkarni that you be made village ombudsman, and he's agreed."

Savitri stopped swinging around. "You actually got him to agree?"

"Not at first," I admitted. "But I was persuasive. And I convinced him that at least this way you'd be required to help people rather than bother them."

"Rohit Kulkarni," Savitri said. "Such a fine man."

"He does have his moments," I allowed. "But he did give his approval, finally. So just say yes, and the job is yours. And so is the chair."

"I definitely don't want the chair," Savitri said.

"Fine," I said. "Then you'll have nothing to remember me by."

"I don't want the job, either," Savitri said.

"What?" I said.

"I said, I don't want the job," Savitri said. "When I found out that you were leaving, I went looking for another job. And I found one."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's another assistant job," Savitri said.

"But you could be ombudsman," I said.

"Oh, yes, be ombudsman in *New Goa*," Savitri said, and then noticed my look; after all, that had been my job. "No offense. You took your job after you'd seen the universe. I've been in the same village all my life. I'm thirty years old. It's time to leave."

"You've found a job in Missouri City," I said, naming the district capital.

"No," Savitri said.

"I'm confused," I said.

"This is not news," Savitri said, and then continued on before I could retort. "My new job is off-planet. On a new colony called Roanoke. Maybe you've heard of it."

"Okay, now I'm *really* confused," I said.

"Seems that a two-person team is leading the colony," Savitri said. "I asked one of them for a job. She said yes."

"You're Jane's assistant?" I asked.

"Actually, I'm assistant to the colony leader," Savitri said. "Since there are two of you, I'm your assistant, too. I still won't get you tea."

"Huckleberry's not one of the colonies that was allowed to send colonists," I said.

"No," Savitri said. "But as the colony leaders, you are allowed to hire whomever you like for your support staff. Jane already knows and trusts me and knows that you and I work together well. It made sense."

"When did she hire you?" I asked.

"The day you gave notice here," Savitri said. "She came in while you were out to lunch. We talked about it and she offered me the job."

"And neither of you bothered to tell me about this," I said.

"She was going to," Savitri said. "But I asked her not to."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because then you and I wouldn't have had *this* wonderful, wonderful conversation," Savitri said, and then spun around in my chair, laughing.

"Get out of my chair," I said.

I was standing in the bare living room of my packed-up and stored-away home, getting misty, when Hickory and Dickory approached me.

"We would like to talk to you, Major Perry," Hickory said to me.

"Yes, all right," I said, surprised. In the seven years that Hickory and Dickory had been with us we had conversed a number of times. But they had never once initiated a conversation; at most, they would wait silently to be acknowledged.

"We will use our implants," Hickory said.

"Fine," I said. Both Hickory and Dickory fingered collars that rested at the base of their long necks, and pressed a button on the right side of the collar.

The Obin were a created species; the Consu, a race so far advanced of ours that it was almost unfathomable, had found the Obin's ancestors and used their technology to force intelligence on the poor bastards. The Obin indeed became intelligent; what they didn't become was *aware*. Whatever process that allowed for consciousness—the sense of self—was entirely missing from the Obin. Individual Obin had no ego or personality; it was only as a group that the Obin were aware that they were lacking a thing all other intelligent species had. Whether the Consu accidentally or intentionally made the Obin nonconscious was a matter of debate, but given my own encounters with the Consu over the years, I suspect they were simply curious, and the Obin were just another experiment to them.

The Obin desired consciousness enough that they were willing to risk a war with the Colonial Union to get it. The war was a demand of Charles Boutin, a scientist who was the first to record and store a human consciousness outside the supporting structure of the brain. Boutin was killed by Special Forces before he could give the Obin consciousness on an individual level, but his work was close enough to completion that the Colonial Union was able to strike a deal with the Obin to finish the work. The Obin went from foe to friend overnight, and the Colonial Union came through on Boutin's work, creating a consciousness implant based on the CDF's existing BrainPal technology. It was consciousness as an accessory.

Humans—the few who know the story, anyway—naturally regard Boutin as a traitor, a man whose plan to topple the Colonial Union

would have caused the slaughter of billions of humans. The Obin equally and naturally regard him as one of their great racial heroes, a Prometheus figure who gave them not fire but awareness. If you ever needed an argument that heroism is relative, there it is.

My own feelings on the matter were more complicated. Yes, he was a traitor to his species and deserved to die. He's also the biological father to Zoë, who I think is as wonderful a human as I've met. It's hard to say that you're glad the father of your beautiful and terribly clever adopted daughter is dead, even when you know it's better that he is.

Given how the Obin feel about Boutin, it's not in the least surprising they would feel possessive about Zoë; one of their primary treaty demands was, essentially, visitation rights. What eventually got agreed to was a situation where two Obin would live with Zoë and her adopted family. Zoë named them Hickory and Dickory when they arrived. Hickory and Dickory were allowed to use their consciousness implants to record some of their time with Zoë. Those recordings were shared among all the Obin with consciousness implants; in effect, they *all* shared time with Zoë.

Jane and I allowed this under very limited conditions while Zoë was too young to really understand what was going on. After Zoë was old enough to grasp the concept it was her decision. Zoë allowed it. She likes the idea of her life being shared with an entire species, although like any teenager she has extended periods of wanting to be left alone. Hickory and Dickory turn their implants off when that happens; no point wasting perfectly good consciousness on time not spent with Zoë. Their wanting to be conscious talking to me alone was something new.

There was a slight lag between the moment Hickory and Dickory activated their collars, which stored the hardware that housed their consciousness, and the moment the collar communicated with the neural overlay in their brains. It was like watching sleepwalkers wake up. It was also a little creepy. Although not as creepy as what came next: Hickory smiling at me.

"We will be deeply sad to leave this place," Hickory said. "Please understand we have lived our entire conscious life here. We feel it strongly within us, as do all Obin. We thank you for allowing us to share your lives with us."

"You're welcome," I said. This seemed a trivial thing for the two Obin to want to discuss with me. "You sound as if you were leaving us. I thought you were to be coming with us."

"We are," Hickory said. "Dickory and I are aware of the burden we carry both to attend to your daughter and to share our experiences with all other Obin. It can be overwhelming. We cannot keep our implants engaged for long, you know. The emotional strain is so great. The implants are not perfect, and our brains have difficulties. We get . . . overstimulated."

"I didn't know that," I said.

"We would not wish to burden you with it," Hickory said. "And it was not important for you to know. We managed it so that you would not need to know. But recently, both Dickory and I have found that when we turn on our implants, we are immediately overwhelmed with emotion for Zoë, and for you and Lieutenant Sagan."

"It's a stressful time for all of us," I said.

Another Obin smile, even more ghastly than the first. "My apologies," Hickory said. "I have been unclear. Our emotion is not formless anxiety over leaving this place or this planet, or excitement or nervousness about traveling to a new world. It is a very specific thing. It is *concern*."

"I think we all have concerns," I began, but then stopped when I saw a new expression on Hickory's face, one I had never noticed before. Hickory looked *impatient*. Or possibly it was frustrated with me. "I'm sorry, Hickory. Please continue."

Hickory stood there for a minute, as if debating something with itself, then abruptly turned from me to confer with Dickory. I spent the time reflecting that suddenly the names that a small child puckishly gave these two creatures several years ago no longer seemed to fit in the slightest.

"Forgive me, Major," Hickory said, finally, returning its attention to me. "I regret I may be blunt here. We may be unable to fully express our concern. You may be ignorant of certain facts and it may not be our place to provide them to you. Let me ask you: What do you think is the status of this part of space? The portion in which we the Obin and you the Colonial Union reside among other species."

"We're at war," I said. "We have our colonies and we try to keep them safe. Other species have their colonies and try to keep them safe, too. We all fight over planets that fit our species' needs. We all fight each other."

"Aah," Hickory said. "We all fight each other. No alliances? No treaties?"

"Obviously there are a few," I said. "We have one with the Obin. Other races may have treaties and allies with a few other species. But generally, yes. We all fight. Why?"

Hickory's smile passed from ghastly into rictus territory. "We will tell you what we can," Hickory said. "We can tell you about things already spoken of. We know that your Secretary of Colonization has claimed that the colony you are calling Roanoke was given to you by the Obin. The planet we call Garsinhir. We know that it is claimed we have taken a planet from you in return."

"That's right," I said.

"There is no such agreement," Hickory said. "Garsinhir remains Obin territory."

"That can't be right," I said. "I've been to Roanoke. I've walked the ground where the colony will be. I think you may be mistaken."

"We are not mistaken," Hickory said.

"You must be," I said. "Please don't take this the wrong way, but you two are companions and bodyguards to a teenage human. It's possible whoever your contacts are at your level don't have the best information."

A flicker of something crossed over Hickory's face; I suspect it was *amusement*. "Be assured, Major, that the Obin do not send mere *companions* to guard and care for Boutin's child or her family. And be assured that Garsinhir remains in Obin hands."

I thought about this. "You're saying that the Colonial Union is lying about Roanoke," I said.

"It's possible your Secretary of Colonization may be misinformed," Hickory said. "We cannot say. But whatever the cause of the error, there is an error of fact."

"Maybe the Obin are allowing us to colonize your world," I said. "I understand that your body chemistry makes Obin susceptible to native

infections. Having an ally there is better than leaving the world unoccupied."

"Perhaps," Hickory said. Its voice was noncommittal in a very studied way.

"The colony ship leaves Phoenix Station in two weeks," I said. "Another week beyond that and we'll be landing in Roanoke. Even if what you say is true, there's not anything I can *do* about it now."

"I must apologize again," Hickory said. "I did not mean to suggest there was anything you could or should do. I would only wish for you to *know*. And to know at least some of the nature of our concern."

"Is there more than that?" I asked.

"We have said what we can," Hickory said. "Except for this. We are at your service, Major. Yours, Lieutenant Sagan's and especially and always Zoë's. Her father gave us the gift of ourselves. He asked a high price, which we willingly would have paid." I shuddered slightly at this, remembering what the price had been. "He died before that price, that debt could be repaid. We owe that debt now to his daughter, and the new debt accrued in her sharing her life with us. We owe it to her. And we owe it to her family."

"Thank you, Hickory," I said. "I know we are grateful that you and Dickory have served us so well."

Hickory's smile returned. "I regret to say you misunderstand me again, Major. Certainly I and Dickory are at your service and always shall be. But when I say we are at your service, I mean the Obin."

"The Obin," I said. "As in, *all* of you."

"Yes," said Hickory. "All of us. Until the last of us, if necessary."

"Oh," I said. "I'm sorry, Hickory. I'm not quite sure what to say to that."

"Say that you'll remember it," Hickory said. "When the time comes."

"I will," I said.

"We would ask you to keep this conversation in confidence," Hickory said. "For now."

"All right," I said.

"Thank you, Major," Hickory said. It looked back at Dickory and then back at me. "I fear we have made ourselves overly emotional. We

will turn off our implants now, with your permission."

"Please," I said. The two Obin reached up to their necks to switch off their personalities. I watched as the animation slid from their faces, replaced with blank intelligence.

"We rest now," Hickory said, and it and its partner left, leaving me in an empty room.

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THREE

Here's one way to colonize: You take two hundred or three hundred people, allow them to pack what supplies they see fit, drop them off on the planet of their choice, say "see you," and then come back a year later—after they've all died of malnutrition brought on by ignorance and lack of supplies, or have been wiped out by another species who wants the place for themselves—to pick up the bones.

This isn't a very successful way to colonize. In our all-too-short ramp-up period, both Jane and I read enough reports on the demise of wildcat colonies that were designed in just this fashion to be convinced of this salient fact.

On the other hand you don't want to drop a hundred thousand people onto a new colony world either, complete with all the comforts of civilization. The Colonial Union has the means to do something like this, if it wanted to. But it doesn't want to. No matter how close a planet's gravitational field, circumference, land mass, atmosphere or life chemistry is to Earth's, or to any other planets humans have as yet colonized, it isn't Earth, and there's no practical way of knowing what sort of nasty surprise a planet has in store for humans there. Earth itself has a funny way of devising new diseases and ailments to kill off unwary humans, and there we're a native species. We're foreign bodies when we land on new worlds, and we know what any life system does to a foreign body in its midst: it tries to kill it as quickly as possible.

Here's an interesting bit of trivia I learned about failed colonies: Not counting wildcat colonies, the number one cause of abandoned

human colonies is not territorial disputes with other species; it's native bugs killing off the settlers. Other intelligent species we can fight off; that's a battle we understand. Battling an entire ecosystem that's trying to kill you is an altogether trickier proposition.

Landing a hundred thousand colonists on a planet just to watch them all die of a fast-moving native infection you can't cure in time is just a waste of perfectly good colonists.

Which is not to *underestimate* territorial disputes. A human colony is *exponentially* more likely to be attacked in the first two or three years of its lifespan than it is at any other point in time. The colony is focused on creating itself and is vulnerable to attack. The Colonial Defense Forces' presence at a new colony, while not insignificant, is still a fraction of what it will be once a space station is built above the colony a decade or two later. And the simple fact that someone has colonized a planet makes it rather more attractive to everyone else, because those colonists have done all the hard work of colonization for you. Now all you have to do is scrape them off the planet and take it for your own.

Landing a hundred thousand colonists on a planet just to have them scraped off it is *also* a waste of perfectly good colonists. And despite the Colonial Union essentially farming Third World countries on Earth for colonists, if you start losing a hundred thousand colonists every time a new colony fails, eventually you run short of colonists.

Fortunately there is a happy medium between these two scenarios. It involves taking twenty-five hundred or so colonists, landing them on a new world in the early spring, providing them sustainable and durable technology to address their immediate needs, and giving them the task of both becoming self-sufficient on the new world, and of preparing the world, two or three years down the line, for roughly ten thousand more new colonists. Those second wave colonists will have another five years or so to help prepare for fifty thousand new colonists, and so on.

There are five formal and initial waves of colonists, by which time the colony ideally has a population of a million or so, spread out over numerous small towns and one or two largish cities. After the fifth wave becomes established and the colony's infrastructure is established, everything switches to a rolling colonization process. When the population reaches ten million or thereabouts, immigration stops, the

colony gets limited self-rule within the CU federal system, and humanity has another bulwark against racial extinction at the hands of a callous universe. That is, if those initial twenty-five hundred survive a hostile ecosystem, attacks from other races, humanity's own organizational shortcomings and simple, ever-present damn bad luck.

Twenty-five hundred colonists are numerous enough to start the process of making a world a human world. They are few enough that if they die, the CU can shed a tear and move on. And, indeed, the tear-shedding part of that is strictly optional. It's an interesting thing, to be both critical and expendable to humanity's effort to populate the stars. On the whole, I thought, I might have been smarter to stay on Huckleberry.

"All right, I give up," I said, pointing to the massive container that was being maneuvered into the cargo hold of the *Ferdinand Magellan*. "Tell me what that is."

Aldo Ferro, the cargo foreman, checked the manifest on his PDA. "That contains all the mixin's for your colony's sewage treatment plant," he said, and pointed at a row of containers. "And those are your sewer pipes, septic tanks and waste transports."

"No outhouses for Roanoke," I said. "We're going to poo in style."

"It's not a matter of style," Ferro said. "You're going to a class-six planet, complete with a noncompatible ecological system. You're going to need all the fertilizer you can get. That sewage treatment system will take all your biological waste, from crap to carcasses, and make sterile compost for your fields. It's probably the single most important thing you have on this manifest. Try not to break it."

I smiled. "You seem to know a lot about sewage," I said.

"Yeah, right," Ferro said. "More like I know about packing a new colony. I've been working in this cargo hold for twenty-five years, and we've been transporting new colonies all that time. Give me a manifest and I can tell you what sort of planet the colony's going to, what its seasons are, how heavy its gravity is and whether that colony is going to make it through its first year. You want to know how I knew your

colony had a noncompatible ecosystem? Besides the sewage plant, I mean. That's standard on any colony."

"Sure," I said.

Ferro tapped something on the PDA screen and handed the screen to me, with a list of containers. "Okay, first off," Ferro said. "Food stores. Every colony ships with a three-month supply of dry goods and basic foodstuffs for every member of the colony, and another month supply of dry rations, to allow the colony time to start hunting and producing its own food. But you have a six-month supply of foodstuffs and two months of dry rations per colonist. That's the sort of load out you see for a noncompatible ecosystem, because you can't eat off the land right away. In fact, it's actually *more* than usual for an NCE; usually there's a four-month supply of dry goods and six weeks of rations."

"Why would they give us more food than usual?" I asked. I actually knew the answer to this—I was supposed to be running the colony, after all—but I wanted to see if Ferro was as good as he thought he was.

Ferro smiled. "Your clue is right in front of you, Mr. Perry. You're also shipping with a double load of soil conditioners and fertilizers. That tells me the soil there is no good, as is, for growing human food. That extra food buys you time if some idiot doesn't condition a field properly."

"That's right," I said.

"Yup," Ferro agreed. "Final thing: You've got more than the usual load out in your medical supplies for poison treatment, which is typical for NCEs. You've also got a hell of a lot of veterinary detoxifiers, too. Which reminds me," Ferro took back the PDA and pulled up a new list of containers. "Double load of feed for your livestock."

"You are a master of manifests, Ferro," I said. "You ever think of colonizing?"

"Hell, no," Ferro said. "I've seen enough of these new colonies go out to know that some of them don't make it. I'm happy to load you up and load you out and then wave good-bye and come home to Phoenix to my wife and cat. No offense, Mr. Perry."

"None taken," I said, and nodded to his manifest. "So, you said you can tell from a manifest whether a colony is going to make it. How

about us?"

"You're loaded for bear," Ferro said. "You're going to be fine. But some of your stuff is a little weird. There's stock on your manifest I haven't seen shipped before. You've got containers full of obsolete equipment." Ferro handed back the manifest to me. "Look, you have everything you need for a blacksmith's shop. In 1850. I didn't even think this stuff existed outside a period recreation fair."

I looked at the manifest. "Some of our colonists are Mennonites," I said. "They prefer not to use modern technology if they can avoid it. They think it's a distraction."

"How many of your colonists are whatever it is you just said?" Ferro asked.

"About two hundred, two hundred and fifty," I said, handing back the PDA.

"Huh," Ferro said. "Well, then, it seems you're pretty much prepared for everything, up to and including time travel back to the Wild West. If the colony fails, you can't blame it on the inventory."

"So it'll be all my fault," I said.

"Probably," Ferro said.

"I think the one thing we can all say is that we don't want to see this colony *fail*," said Manfred Trujillo. "I don't think we're in danger of that. But I do worry about some of the decisions that have been made. I think they make things more difficult."

Around the conference table was a round of nods. At my right, I saw Savitri take notes, marking which heads were nodding. On the other end of the table, Jane sat impassively, but I knew she was counting heads, too. She was in intelligence. This is what she does.

We were coming to the close of the inaugural official meeting of the Roanoke Council, which consisted of me and Jane as the colony heads, and the ten representatives of the colonists themselves, one for each world, who would act as our deputies. Theoretically, at least. Here in the real word, the jockeying for power had already begun.

Manfred Trujillo was primary among them. Trujillo had started the push to allow colony worlds to seed a new colony several years earlier,

from his perch as Erie's representative to the CU legislature. He had been miffed when the Department of Colonization took his idea but neglected to install him as leader; he'd been even more miffed when the colony leaders turned out to be us, whom he did not know, and who did not seem to be especially impressed with him. But he was smart enough to mask his frustration in general terms, and spent most of the meeting trying to undermine Jane and me in the most complimentary way possible.

"For example, this council," said Trujillo, and looked up and down the table. "Each of us is charged with representing the interests of our fellow colonists. I don't doubt each of us will do that job admirably. But this council is an advisory council to the colony heads—advisory only. I wonder if that allows us to best represent the needs of the colony."

We're not even out of the dock and he's already talking revolution, I thought. Back in the days when I still had a BrainPal, I could shoot that entire thought over to Jane; as it was she caught my glance to her, which told her well enough what I was thinking.

"New colonies are administered under Department of Colonization regulations," Jane said. "The regulations require colony leaders to wield sole administrative and executive power. Things will be chaotic enough when we arrive that mustering a quorum for every decision is not ideal."

"I'm not suggesting that you two not do your jobs," Trujillo said. "Merely that our input should be more than symbolic. Many of us have been involved with this colony since the days it was only on the drawing board. We have a wealth of experience."

"Whereas we only have a couple months of involvement," I prompted.

"You are a recent and valuable addition to the process," Trujillo said. Smooth. "I would hope you would see the advantages to our being part of the decision-making process."

"It seems to me that the Colonization regulations are there for a reason," I said. "The DoC has overseen the colonization of dozens of worlds. They might know how to do it."

"Those colonists came from disadvantaged nations back on Earth," Trujillo said. "They do not have many of the advantages that we have."

I sensed Savitri tense up next to me; the arrogance of the old-line colonies, which had been founded by Western countries before the CU took over colonization, had always appalled her.

"What advantages are those?" Jane said. "John and I just spent seven years living among 'those colonists' and their descendants. Savitri here is one of them. I'm not sensing any notable *advantages* among those at this table to them."

"I may have phrased that poorly," Trujillo said, beginning what I suspected was another conciliatory knife-twisting.

"You may have," I said, cutting him off. "However, I'm afraid the point is academic. DoC regulations don't give us much flexibility on the administration of first-wave colonies, nor do they make allowances for the previous national affiliation of its colonists. We are obliged to treat all colonists equally, no matter where they come from. I think that's a wise policy, don't you?"

Trujillo paused for a beat, clearly annoyed at the turn of rhetorical events. "Yes, of course."

"I'm glad to hear it. So for the moment, we'll continue to follow regulations. Now," I said before Trujillo could ramp himself up again, "anyone else?"

"Some of my people are complaining about their berth assignments," said Paulo Gutierrez, Khartoum's representative.

"Is there something wrong?" I asked.

"They're unhappy that they're not closer to other colonists from Khartoum," he said.

"The entire ship is only a few hundred meters long," I said. "And berth information is readily accessible through PDAs. They shouldn't have any problems locating each other."

"I understand that," Gutierrez said. "I just think the expectation would be that we would be berthed together in our groups."

"That's why we didn't do it that way," I said. "You know, once we set foot on Roanoke, none of us will be from Khartoum, or from Erie, or from Kyoto." I nodded toward Hiram Yoder, who nodded back. "We're all going to be from Roanoke. Might as well get a head start on

that. There's only twenty-five hundred of us. That's a little small for ten separate tribes."

"That's a nice sentiment," said Marie Black, from Rus. "But I don't think our settlers are going to very quickly forget where they came from."

"I don't expect them to," I said. "I don't want them to forget where they came from. I would hope that they would focus on where they are. Or will be, soon enough."

"Colonists are represented here by their worlds," Trujillo said.

"It makes sense to do it that way," Jane said. "For now, at least. Once we're on Roanoke, we may revisit this." That tidbit sat in the air for a few seconds.

Marta Piro, from Zhong Guo, raised her hand. "There's a rumor that two Obin are coming with us to Roanoke," she said.

"It's not a rumor," I said. "It's true. Hickory and Dickory are members of my household."

"Hickory and Dickory?" asked Lee Chen, from Franklin.

"Our daughter Zoë named them when she was younger," I said.

"If you don't mind me asking, how is it two Obin are members of your household?" Piro asked.

"Our daughter keeps them as pets," Jane said. This got an uneasy laugh. That wasn't so bad. After an hour of being not-so-subtly hammered on by Trujillo, it wouldn't hurt to be seen as the sort of people who could keep terrifying aliens as domestic companions.

"You need to push that son of a bitch Trujillo out of a shuttle bay," Savitri said after the room had cleared.

"Relax," I said. "Some people are just no good at not being in charge."

"Gutierrez, Black and Trujillo have made their own political party," Jane said. "And of course, Trujillo's gone running to Kranjic to spill the details of this meeting. They've gotten very cozy."

"But it doesn't cause us any problems," I said.

"No," Jane said. "None of the rest of the representatives seems to have much truck with Trujillo, and the individual colonists are still boarding; he's had no time to get known to any of them who aren't from Erie. Even if he had, there's no way the DoC would replace us.

Secretary Bell hates Trujillo and has since they were representatives. Taking his idea and installing us as colony leaders is just another way she has of sticking it to him."

"General Rybicki warned us things have gotten political," I said.

"General Rybicki has a way of not quite telling us everything we need to know," Jane said.

"You may be right," I said. "But on this point he was right on the nose. Anyway, for now let's not worry about it too much. We've got enough to do and after the *Magellan* leaves Phoenix Station we're going to get even busier. Speaking of which, I promised Zoë I would take her down to Phoenix today. Either of you want to come? It's me, Zoë and the Obin twins."

"I'll pass," Savitri said. "I'm still getting used to Hickory and Dickory."

"You've known them for nearly eight years," I said.

"Yes," Savitri said. "Nearly eight years, for five minutes at a time. I need to work up to extended visits."

"Fine," I said, and turned to Jane. "What about you?"

"I'm supposed to meet with General Szilard," she said, referring to the commander of Special Forces. "He wants to catch up."

"All right," I said. "You're missing out."

"What are you doing down there?" Jane asked.

"We're going to visit Zoë's parents," I said. "The other ones."

I stood at the gravestone that bore the name of Zoë's father and mother, and of Zoë herself. Zoë's dates, based on the belief she had died in a colony attack, were obviously incorrect; less obviously, so were her father's. Her mother's dates were accurate. Zoë had crouched down to get close to the names; Hickory and Dickory had connected their consciousnesses just long enough to have a ten-second ecstasy at the idea of being at the death marker of Boutin, then disconnected and stood at a distance, impassive.

"I remember the last time I was here," Zoë said. The small bouquet of flowers she brought lay propped up on the gravestone. "It was the day Jane asked me if I wanted to come live with you and her."

"Yes," I said. "You found out you were going to live with me before I found out I was going to live with either of you."

"I thought you and Jane were in love," Zoë said. "That you planned to live together."

"We were," I said. "We did. But it was complicated."

"Everything about our little family is complicated," Zoë said. "You're eighty-eight years old. Jane is a year older than I am. I'm the daughter of a traitor."

"You're also the only girl in the universe with her own Obin escort," I said.

"Speaking of complicated," Zoë said. "By day, typical kid. By night, adored by an entire alien race."

"There are worse setups," I said.

"I suppose," Zoë said. "You'd think being the object of worship for a whole alien race would get me out of homework now and then. Don't think I haven't noticed that it doesn't."

"We didn't want it to go to your head," I said.

"Thanks," she said. She pointed to the gravestone. "Even *this* is complicated. I'm alive, and it's my father's clone who is buried here, not my father. The only real person here is my mother. My *real* mother. It's all very complicated."

"I'm sorry," I said.

Zoë shrugged. "I'm used to it by now. Most of the time it's not a bad thing. And it gives you perspective, doesn't it? I'd be at school, listening to Anjali or Chadna complain about how complicated their lives were, and I'd be thinking to myself, girl, you have no idea what complicated is."

"Good to hear you've handled it well," I said.

"I try," Zoë said. "I have to admit it wasn't a very good day when the two of you told me the truth about Dad."

"It wasn't much of a fun day for us, either," I said. "But we thought you deserved to know the truth."

"I know," Zoë said, and stood up. "But you know. I woke up one morning thinking my real dad was just a scientist and went to bed knowing he could have wiped out the entire human race. It messes with you."

"Your father was a good man to you," I said. "Whatever else he was and whatever else he did, he got that thing right."

Zoë walked over to me and gave me a hug. "Thank you for bringing me here. You're a nice man, ninety-year-old dad," she said.

"You're a great kid, teenage daughter," I said. "You ready to go?"

"In a second," she said, and walked back over to the gravestone, knelt quickly and kissed it. Then she stood up and suddenly looked like an embarrassed teen. "I did that the last time I was here," she said. "I wanted to see if it made me feel the same."

"Did it?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said, still embarrassed. "Come on. Let's go." We walked toward the gates of the cemetery; I took out my PDA and signaled for a taxi to come pick us up.

"How do you like the *Magellan*?" I asked, as we walked.

"It's interesting," Zoë said. "It's been a long time since I've been on a spaceship. I forgot what it was like. And this one's so *big*."

"It has to fit twenty-five hundred colonists and all of their stuff," I said.

"I get that," Zoë said. "I'm just saying it's large. It's starting to fill up, though. The colonists are there now. I've met some of them. The ones my age, I mean."

"Meet any you like?" I asked.

"A couple," Zoë said. "There's one girl who seems to want to get to know me. Gretchen Trujillo."

"Trujillo, you say," I said.

Zoë nodded. "Why? You know her?"

"I think I may know her father," I said.

"It's a small world," Zoë said.

"And it's about to get a lot smaller," I said.

"Good point," Zoë said, and looked around. "I wonder if I'll ever make it back here."

"You're going to a new colony," I said. "Not the afterlife."

Zoë smiled at this. "You weren't paying attention to the gravestone," she said. "I've been to the afterlife. Coming back from that's not a problem. It's life you don't get over."

• • •

"Jane's taking a nap," Savitri said, as Zoë and I returned to our stateroom. "She said she wasn't feeling well."

I raised my eyebrows at this; Jane was the healthiest person I knew, even after she had been transferred into a standard human body. "Yes, I know," Savitri said, catching the eyebrow. "I thought it was odd, too. She said she'd be fine, but not to disturb her for at least a few hours."

"All right," I said. "Thanks. Zoë and I were going to go to the rec deck anyway. You want to come along?"

"Jane asked me to work on some things before I got her up," Savitri said. "Some other time."

"You work harder for Jane than you ever did for me," I said.

"It's the power of inspiring leadership," Savitri said.

"Nice," I said.

Savitri made shooing motions. "I'll ping your PDA when Jane is up," Savitri said. "Now, go. You're distracting me."

The *Magellan*'s recreation deck was arrayed like a small park, and was packed with colonists and their families, sampling the diversions the *Magellan* would offer them on our week-long journey to skip distance, thence to Roanoke. As we arrived, Zoë spied a trio of teenage girls and waved; one waved back and beckoned her over. I wondered if it was Gretchen Trujillo. Zoë left me with a quick backward glance good-bye. I wandered around the deck, watching my fellow colonists. Soon enough most of them would recognize me as the colony leader. For now, however, I was safely and happily anonymous.

At first glance the colonists seemed to be moving freely among each other, but after a minute or two I noticed some clumping, with groups of colonists standing apart. English was the common language of all the colonies, but each world also had its secondary languages, largely based on the stock of its original colonists. I heard snatches of these languages as I walked: Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese, Russian, German.

"You hear them, too," someone said behind me. I turned and saw Trujillo. "All the different languages," he said, and smiled. "Residue from our old worlds, I guess you would say. I doubt people will stop speaking them when we get to Roanoke."

"This your subtle way of suggesting that the colonists won't be in a rush to trade in their own nationalities to become newly minted Roanokers," I said.

"It's just an observation. And I'm sure in time we all will become . . . *Roanokers,"* Trujillo said, pronouncing that last word as if it were something spiky that he'd been required to swallow. "It will just take some time. Possibly more time than you now suspect. We are doing something different here, after all. Not just creating a new colony from the old-line colony worlds, but mixing ten different cultures into one colony. To be entirely honest about it, I have my reservations I think the Department of Colonization should have taken my original suggestion and let just one of the colonies field settlers."

"That's bureaucracy for you," I said. "Always messing up perfect plans."

"Yes, well," Trujillo said, and waved his hand slightly, to encompass the polyglot settlers, and possibly me. "We both know this is as much about my feud with Secretary Bell as anything else. She was against Roanoke from the start, but there was too much momentum from the colonies for her stop this from happening. But there was nothing stopping her from making it as impractical as possible to manage. Including offering the colony leadership to a pair of well-meaning neophytes who have no idea where the landmines are in this situation, and who will make convenient scapegoats if the colony fails."

"You're saying we're patsies," I said.

"I'm saying that you and your wife are intelligent, competent and politically expendable," Trujillo said. "When the colony fails, the blame will fall on you, not on Bell."

"Even though she chose us," I said.

"Did she?" Trujillo said. "I heard you were suggested by General Rybicki. He's well enough insulated from political fallout because he's CDF, and they're not required to care about politics. No, when the shit hits, Perry, it's going to roll downhill, right onto you and your wife."

"You're sure the colony will fail," I said. "And yet, here you are."

"I'm sure the colony *could* fail," Trujillo said. "And I'm sure there are those—Secretary Bell among them—who would be happy to see it fail, as payback against their political enemies and to cover up their own

incompetence. They certainly designed it to fail. What can keep it from failing are people with the will and *experience* to help it survive."

"Someone like you, for example," I said.

Trujillo took a step closer to me. "Perry, I understand it's *easy* to think that this is all just about my ego. Really, I do. But I want you to consider something else for a moment. There are twenty-five hundred people on this ship who are here because six years ago I stood up in the CU representative chamber and demanded our colonization rights. I am responsible for their being here, and because I was powerless to stop Bell and her cronies from jury-rigging this colony to self-destruct, I'm responsible for putting these people in danger. This morning, I wasn't suggesting you let us help with colony administration just because I need to run things. I was suggesting it because given what the DoC has given you to work with, you're going to need all the help you can get, and those of us in that room with you this morning have been living with this for years. If we don't help you, the alternative is failure, straight and sure."

"I appreciate the confidence in our leadership skills," I said.

"You're not hearing what I'm saying," Trujillo said. "Damn it, Perry, I want you to succeed. I want this *colony* to succeed. The very last thing I want to do is undermine the leadership of you and your wife. If I did that, I'd be jeopardizing the lives of everyone in the colony. I'm not your enemy. I want to help you fight the people who are."

"You're saying the Department of Colonization would put twenty-five hundred people at risk to get back at you," I said.

"No," Trujillio said. "Not to get back at me. But to counter a threat to its colonial practices? To help the CU keep the colonies in their place? Twenty-five hundred colonists are not too many for a thing like that. If you know anything about colonization, you know twenty-five hundred colonists is the standard size for a seed colony. We lose seed colonies from time to time; we expect to lose a few. We're *used* to it. It's not *twenty-five hundred* people, it's just *one* seed colony.

"But this is where it gets interesting. One seed colony lost is well within expectations for DoC colonization protocols. But the colonists come from ten different CU worlds, all of which are colonizing for the

first time. Each of those worlds will feel the failure of the colony. It's a blow to the national psyche. And then the DoC can turn around and say, this is why we don't let you colonize. To protect you. They'll spoon-feed that argument to the colonies, all the colonies will swallow it down, and we'll be back to the status quo."

"It's an interesting theory," I said.

"Perry, you were in the Colonial Defense Forces for years," Trujillo said. "You know the end results of CU policies. Can you honestly tell me, with all your experience, that the scenario I've outlined for you is completely outside the realm of possibility?"

I kept quiet. Trujillo smiled grimly. "Food for thought, Perry," he said. "Something for you to consider the next time you and your wife are slamming the door on the rest of us at one of our advisory meetings. I trust you'll do what you think is best for the colony." He glanced over my shoulder, looking at something beyond it. "I think our daughters have met," he said.

I turned around to see Zoë talking animatedly with one of the girls I had seen earlier; she was the one who had beckoned Zoë over. "It appears they have," I said.

"They seem to get along," Trujillo said. "Our Roanoke colony starts there, I think. Maybe we can follow their example."

"I'm not sure I can swallow the idea of a selfless Manfred Trujillo," Jane said. She had propped herself up in bed. Babar lolled at the end of the bed, his tail thumping contentedly.

"That's two of us," I said. I was sitting in the chair next to the bed. "The problem is I can't entirely discount what he's saying, either."

"Why not?" Jane said. She began to reach for the pitcher of water she had at the bedside table, but was awkwardly positioned. I took the pitcher and the glass next to it and started pouring.

"You remember what Hickory said about Roanoke planet," I said, handing her the glass.

"Thanks," she said, and downed the entire glass in about five seconds.

"Wow," I said. "You sure you're feeling better?"

"I'm fine," she said. "I'm just thirsty." She handed the glass back to me; I poured her more water. She sipped this one more moderately. "Roanoke planet," she said, prompting me.

"Hickory said that Roanoke planet was still under the control of the Obin," I said. "If the Department of Colonization really thinks this colony is going to fail, that might actually make sense."

"Why trade for a planet you know your colonists aren't going to keep," Jane said.

"Exactly," I said. "And there's another thing. I was in the cargo hold today, going over the manifest with the cargo chief, and he mentioned that we were packing a whole lot of obsolete equipment."

"That's probably to do with the Mennonites," Jane said, and sipped her water again.

"That's what I said, too," I said. "But after I talked to Trujillo I went through the manifest again. The cargo chief was right. There's more obsolete equipment there than we can chalk up to the Mennonites."

"We're underequipped," Jane said.

"That's the thing," I said. "We're not underequipped. We have a whole bunch of obsolete equipment, but it's not in place of more modern equipment, it's there in *addition* to it."

Jane considered this. "What do you think it means?" she asked.

"I don't know that it means anything," I said. "Supply error happens all the time. I remember one time when I was in the CDF we were shipped dress socks instead of medical supplies. Maybe this is that kind of screwup, a couple degrees of magnitude larger."

"We should ask General Rybicki about it," Jane said.

"He's off the station," I said. "He left this morning for Coral, of all places. His office says he's overseeing the diagnostics of a new planetary defense grid. He won't be back for a week standard. I asked his office to look into the colony's inventory for me. But it's not a high priority for them—it's not an obvious problem for the well-being of the colony. They have other things to worry about before we ship out. But maybe we're missing something."

"If we're missing something, we don't have a lot of time to find it," Jane said.

"I know," I said. "As much as I'd like to peg Trujillo as just another self-aggrandizing prick, we have to work on the theory that he might actually have the interests of the colony at heart. It's galling, all things considered."

"There's the possibility he's a self-aggrandizing prick *and* he has the interests of the colony at heart," Jane said.

"You always look on the bright side," I said.

"Have Savitri go through the manifest with an eye toward what we might be missing," Jane said. "I had her do a lot of research on recent seed colonies. If there's something missing, she'll find it."

"You're giving her a lot of work," I said.

Jane shrugged. "You always underutilized Savitri," Jane said. "That's why I hired her. She was capable of a lot more than you gave her. Although it's not entirely your fault. The worst you had to deal with were those idiot Chengelpet brothers."

"You're just saying that because you never had to deal with them," I said. "You should have tried it, one time."

"If I had dealt with them, one time would be all I needed," Jane said.

"How was your thing today with General Szilard?" I asked, changing the subject before my competence could be questioned further.

"It was fine," Jane said. "He was saying some of the things Trujillo was saying to you today, actually."

"That the DoC wants the colony to fail?" I asked.

"No," Jane said. "That there's a lot of political maneuvering going on that you and I don't know much about."

"Like what?" I asked.

"He didn't get into specifics," Jane said. "He said that was because he was confident in our ability to handle things. He asked me if I wanted my old Special Forces body back, just in case."

"That General Szilard," I said. "A first-class kidder."

"He wasn't entirely joking," Jane said, and then raised a placating hand when I gave her my best confused look. "He doesn't have my old body on hand. That's not what I mean. He just means he'd prefer not to have me go to this colony with an unmodified human body."

"That's a cheerful thought," I said. I noticed Jane had begun to sweat. I felt her forehead. "I think you actually have a fever. That's new."

"Unmodified body," Jane said. "Had to happen sometime."

"I'll get you some more water," I said.

"No," Jane said. "I'm not thirsty. I feel like I'm starving, though."

"I'll see if I can get you something from the galley," I said. "What do you want?"

"What have they got?" Jane said.

"Pretty much everything," I said.

"Good," Jane said. "I'll have one of everything."

I reached for my PDA to contact the galley. "It's a good thing the *Magellan* is carrying a double load of food," I said.

"The way I feel right now, it won't be carrying it for long," Jane said.

"All right," I said. "But I think the old saying is that you should starve a fever."

"In this case," Jane said. "The old saying is dead wrong."

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FOUR

"It's like a New Year's Eve party," Zoë said, looking around the recreation deck from our perch on a small dais, at the mass of colonists celebrating around us. After a week of travel by the *Magellan,* we were less than five minutes from the skip to Roanoke.

"It's *exactly* like a New Year's Eve party," I said. "When we skip, the colony's clock officially starts. It'll be second one of minute one of day one of year one, Roanoke time. Get ready for days that are twenty-five hours, eight minutes long, and years that are three hundred and five days long."

"I'll have birthdays more often," Zoë said.

"Yes," I said. "And your birthdays will last longer."

Beside me and Zoë, Savitri and Jane were discussing something Savitri had queried in her PDA. I thought of ribbing them about catching up on work, now of all times, but then I thought better of it. The two of them had quickly become the organizational nexus of the colonial leadership, which was not at all surprising. If they felt something needed to be dealt with right that moment, it probably did.

Jane and Savitri were the brains of the outfit; I was the public relations guy. Over the course of the week I spent several hours with each colonist group, answering their questions about Roanoke, myself and Jane, and anything else they wanted to know about. Each group had its quirks and curiosities. The colonists from Erie seemed a bit distant (possibly reflecting the opinion of Trujillo, who sat in the back of the group while I talked) but warmed up when I played the idiot and

trotted out the fractured Spanish I learned in high school, which led to a discussion of the "new Spanish" words that had been coined on Erie for native plants and animals.

The Mennonites from Kyoto, on the other hand, started off genially by presenting me with a fruit cobbler. That pleasantry out of the way, they then grilled me mercilessly on every aspect of colonial management, much to the amusement of Hiram Yoder. "We live a simple life, but we're not simple," he told me afterward. The colonists from Khartoum were still upset about not being berthed according to planetary origin. The ones from Franklin wanted to know how much support we would have from the Colonial Union and whether they could travel back to Franklin for visits. Albion's colonists wondered what plans were in place if Roanoke were attacked. The ones from Phoenix wanted to know if I thought they would have enough time after a busy day of colonizing to start a softball league.

Questions and problems large and small, immense and trivial, critical and frivolous—all of them got pitched to me, and it was my job to gamely field them and try to help people to come away, if not satisfied with the answers, then at least satisfied that their concerns were taken seriously. In this, my recent experience as an ombudsman turned out to be invaluable. Not just because I had experience in finding answers and solving problems, but because I had several years practice in listening to people and reassuring them something would get done. By the end of our week on the *Magellan* I had colonists coming up to me to help them settle bar bets and petty annoyances; it seemed like old times.

The question-and-answer sessions and fielding issues of the individual colonists were useful for me as well—I needed to get a sense of who all these people were and how well they would mesh with each other. I didn't subscribe to Trujillo's theory of a polyglot colony as a bureaucratic sabotage tactic, but I wasn't pollyanna about harmony, either. The day the *Magellan* got under way we had at least one incident of some teenage boys from one world trying to pick a fight with some others. Gretchen Trujillo and Zoë actually mocked the boys into submission, proving that one should never underestimate the power of teenage girl scorn, but when Zoë recounted the event over

dinner, both Jane and I took note of it. Teenagers can be idiotic and stupid, but teenagers also model their behavior from the signals they get from adults.

The next day we announced a dodgeball tournament for the teenagers, on the theory that dodgeball was universally played in one form or another across all the colonies. We hinted to the colony representatives that it would be nice if they could get their kids to show up. Enough did—the *Magellan* didn't have *that* much for them to do, even after just one day—that we could field ten teams of eight, which we created through random selection, casually thwarting any attempt to team up by colony. Then we created a schedule of games that would culminate with the championship match just before the skip to Roanoke. Thus we kept the teenagers occupied and, coincidentally, mixing with the kids from the other colonies.

By the end of the first day of play, the adults were watching the games; there wasn't much for *them* to do, either. By the end of the second day, I saw adults from one colony chatting up adults from other colonies about which teams had the best chance of going all the way. We were making progress.

By the end of the third day, Jane had to break up a betting ring. Okay, so maybe it wasn't *all* progress. What are you going to do.

Neither Jane nor I were under the illusion that we could create universal harmony through dodgeball, of course. That's a little much to rest on the shoulders of a game played with a bouncy red ball. Trujillo's sabotage scenario wouldn't be sent out of the game with a snappy *pong* sound. But universal harmony could wait. We would settle for people meeting and getting used to each other. Our little dodgeball tournament did that well enough.

After the dodgeball final and the award ceremony—the underdog Dragons managed a dramatic victory over the previously undefeated Slime Molds, whom I had adored for their name alone—most of the colonists stayed on the recreation deck, waiting for the few moments until the skip. The multiple announcement monitors on the deck were all broadcasting the forward view of the *Magellan*, which was a blank black now but would be filled with the image of Roanoke as soon as

the skip happened. The colonists were excited and happy; when Zoë had said it was like a New Year's Eve party, she hit it right on the nose.

"How much time?" Zoë asked me.

I checked my PDA. "Whoops," I said. "A minute twenty seconds to go."

"Let me see that," Zoë said, and grabbed my PDA. Then she grabbed the microphone that I had used when I was congratulating the Dragons on their victory. "Hey!" she said, her voice amplified across the rec deck. "We've got a minute left until we skip!"

A cheer went up from the colonists, and Zoë took it on herself to count off the time in five-second intervals. Gretchen Trujillo and a pair of boys ran up to the stage and clambered up to take their places next to Zoë; one of the boys put his arm around Zoë's waist.

"Hey," I said to Jane, and pointed over to Zoë. "Do you see that?"

Jane looked over. "That must be Enzo," she said.

"Enzo?" I said. "There's an Enzo?"

"Relax, ninety-year-old dad," Jane said, and then rather uncharacteristically hooked her arm around my waist. She usually saved displays of affection for our private time. But she'd also been friskier since getting over her fever.

"You know I don't like it when you do that," I said. "It erodes my authority."

"Cram it," Jane said. I grinned.

Zoë got to the ten-second mark; she and her friends counted down each second, joined by the colonists. When everyone got to zero, there was a sudden hush as eyes and heads turned to the monitor screens. The blank blackness held for what seemed an eternity, and then it was there, a world, large and green and new.

The deck erupted in cheers. People began to hug and kiss, and for lack of a more appropriate song, belted out "Auld Lang Syne."

I turned to my wife and kissed her. "Happy new world," I said.

"Happy new world to you, too," she said. She kissed me again, and then we were both nearly knocked over by Zoë jumping between us and trying to kiss us both.

After a couple of minutes I untangled myself from Zoë and Jane, and saw Savitri staring intently at the closest monitor.

"The planet's not going anywhere," I said to her. "You can relax now."

It took a second before Savitri seemed to hear me. "What?" she said. She looked annoyed.

"I said," I began, but then she was looking at the monitor again, distracted. I came up closer to her.

"What is it?" I asked.

Savitri looked back at me and then suddenly came in close, as if to kiss me. She didn't; instead she put her lips to my ear. "That's not Roanoke," she said, quietly but urgently.

I backed up from her a step and for the first time gave the planet in the monitor my full attention. The planet was green and lush, like Roanoke. Through the clouds I could see the outline of the landmasses below. I tried recalling a map of Roanoke in my head but was drawing a blank. I had focused mostly on the river delta where the colony would live, not on the maps of the continents.

I came back over to Savitri, so our heads were close. "You're sure," I said.

"Yes," Savitri said.

"*Really* sure," I said.

"Yes," Savitri said.

"What planet is it?" I asked.

"I don't know," Savitri said. "That's just it. I don't think *anyone* knows."

"How—" Zoë barged over and demanded a hug from Savitri. Savitri gave her one but her eyes never left me.

"Zoë," I said, "can I have my PDA back?"

"Sure," Zoë said, and gave me a quick peck on the cheek as she handed it over. As I took it the message prompt began to flash. It was from Kevin Zane, captain of the *Magellan*.

"It's not in the registry," Zane said. "We've done a quick read for size and mass to match it. The closest match is Omagh, and that is definitely not Omagh. There is no CU satellite in orbit. We haven't done an entire

orbit yet, but so far there's no sign of any intelligent life, ours or anyone else's."

"There's no other way to tell what planet this is?" Jane asked. I had pulled her away from the celebration as discreetly as I could, and left Savitri to explain our absence to the rest of the colonists.

"We're mapping stars now," Zane said. "We'll start with the relative positions of the stars and see if it matches any of the skies we know. If that doesn't work we'll start doing spectral analysis. If we can find a couple of stars we know, we can triangulate our position. But that's likely to take some time. Right now, we're lost."

"At the risk of sounding like an idiot," I said. "Can't you put this thing in reverse?"

"Normally we could," Zane said. "You have to know where you're going before you make a skip, so you could use that information to plot a trip back. But we programmed in the information for Roanoke. We should be there. But we're not."

"Someone got into your navigation systems," Jane said.

"More than that," said Brion Justi, the *Magellan*'s executive officer. "After we skipped, engineering was locked out of the primary engines. We can monitor the engines but we can't feed them commands, either here on the bridge or in the engine rooms. We can skip in close to a planet, but to skip out we need to get a distance away from the planet's gravity well. We're stuck."

"We're drifting?" I asked. I was not an expert on these things, but I knew that a spaceship didn't necessarily skip into perfectly stable orbits.

"We have maneuvering engines," Justi said. "We're not going to fall into the planet. But our maneuvering engines aren't going to get us to skip distance anytime soon. Even if we knew where we were, at the moment we don't have a way to get home."

"I don't think we want to make that public knowledge just yet," Zane said. "Right now the bridge crew knows about the planet and the engines; the engineering crew knows just about the engines. I informed you as soon as I confirmed both issues. But at the moment, I think that's the extent of it."

"Almost," I said. "Our assistant knows."

"You told your *assistant*?" Justi asked.

"She told us," Jane said sharply. "Before *you* did."

"Savitri isn't going to tell anyone," I said. "It's bottled up for now. But this isn't something we're going to be able to keep from people."

"I understand that," Zane said. "But we need time to get our engines back and to find out where we are. If we tell people before then, there's going to be a panic."

"That is if you can get yourself back online at all," Jane said. "And you're ignoring the larger issue, which is that this ship has been sabotaged."

"We're not ignoring it," Zane said. "When we get back control of the engines we should have a better idea of who did this."

"Did you not run diagnostics on your computers before we left?" Jane asked.

"Of course we did," Zane said testily. "We followed all standard procedures. This is what we're trying to tell you. Everything checked out. Everything *still* checks out. I had my tech officer run a full system diagnostic. The diagnostics tell us everything is fine. As far as the computers are concerned, we are at Roanoke, and we have full control of the engines."

I thought about this. "Your navigation and engine systems aren't right," I said. "What about your other systems?"

"So far, so good," Zane said. "But if whoever did this can take away our navigation and engines and fool our computers into thinking there's no problem, they could take away *any* of the systems."

"Shut down the system," Jane said. "Emergency systems are decentralized. They should keep functioning until you reboot."

"That's not going to be very useful in not causing a panic," Justi said. "And there's no promise that we'd have control again after we reboot. Our computers think everything's fine now; they'll just revert to their current status."

"But if we don't reboot we run the risk of whoever's screwing with your engines and navigations messing with life support or gravity," I said.

"I have a feeling that if whoever did this wanted to play with life support or gravity, we'd be dead already," Zane said. "You want my

opinion, there it is. I'm going to keep systems as is while we try to root out whatever it is that's locking us out of navigation and engines. I'm captain of this ship. It's my call to make. I'm asking you two to give me time to fix this before you inform your colonists."

I looked at Jane. She shrugged. "It will take us at least a day to prepare supply containers for transport down to the planet surface. Another couple of days before the majority of the colonists are ready to go. There's no reason we can't go through the motions of getting the containers ready."

"That means putting your cargo hold people to work," I said to Zane.

"As far as they know, we're where we're supposed to be," Zane said.

"Start your cargo prep tomorrow morning, then," I said. "We'll give you until the first containers are ready to make the trip to the planet. If you haven't figured out the problem then, we're talking to the colonists anyway. All right?"

"Fair enough," Zane said. One of Zane's officers came up to speak to him; he shifted his attention away. I turned my attention to Jane.

"Tell me what you're thinking," I said quietly.

"I'm thinking about what Trujillo said to you," Jane said, also keeping her voice down.

"When he said that the Department of Colonization was sabotaging the colony, I don't think he was suggesting they'd do it like this," I said.

"They would if they wanted to make the point that colonization is a dangerous business, and if someone was worried that it might actually succeed when they wanted it to fail," Jane said. "This way they have a lost colony right out of the box."

"Lost colony," I said, and then my hand went to my eyes. "Jesus Christ."

"What?" Jane said.

"*Roanoke*," I said. "There was a Roanoke colony on Earth. First English settlement in America."

"So?" Jane said.

"It disappeared," I said. "Its governor went back to England to ask for help and supplies, but when he returned all of the settlers were gone. The famous lost colony of Roanoke."

"Seems a bit obvious," Jane said.

"Yeah," I said. "If they really planned to lose us, I don't think they'd tip their hand like that."

"Nevertheless, we are Roanoke colony, and we are lost," Jane said.

"Irony is a bitch," I said.

"Perry, Sagan," Zane said. "Come here."

"What is it?" I asked.

"We've found someone out there," he said. "Encoded tightbeam. He's asking for the two of you."

"That's good news," I said.

Zane grunted noncommittally and pressed a button to put our caller on the intercom.

"This is John Perry," I said. "Jane Sagan and I are here."

"Hello, Major Perry," the voice said. "And hello Lieutenant Sagan! Wow, an honor to talk to you both. I'm Lieutenant Stross, Special Forces. I've been assigned to tell you what you're supposed to do next."

"You know what's happened here?" I asked.

"Let's see," Stross said. "You skipped to what you thought was Roanoke colony, only to find yourselves orbiting an entirely different planet, and now you think you're completely lost. And your Captain Zane there has found out he can't use his engines. That sound about right?"

"Yes," I said.

"Excellent," Stross said. "Well, there's good news and there's bad news. The good news is that you're not lost. We know exactly where you are. The bad news is you're not going anywhere anytime soon. I've got all the details for you when we meet, you two and Captain Zane and me. How about in fifteen minutes?"

"What do you mean, meet?" Zane said. "We're not picking up any ships in the area. We have no way of verifying who you say you are."

"Lieutenant Sagan can vouch for me," Stross said. "As for where I am, clip in a feed from your external camera fourteen and turn on a

light."

Zane looked exasperated and confused, and then nodded over to one of his bridge officers. Zane's overhead monitor blinked to life, showing a portion of the starboard hull. It was dark until a floodlight clicked on and scooped out a cone of light.

"I'm not seeing anything but hull," Zane said.

Something flickered, and suddenly there was a turtle-like object in the camera, floating a foot or so off the hull.

"What the hell is that?" Zane said.

The turtle waved.

"Son of a bitch," Jane said.

"You know what that thing is?" Zane said.

Jane nodded. "That's a Gameran," she said, turning to Zane. "That's Lieutenant Stross. He's telling the truth about who he is. And I think we have just entered a world of shit."

"Wow, air," said Lieutenant Stross, waving his hand back and forth in the expanse of the shuttle bay. "I don't get to feel this much." Stross was floating lazily in the air he was grooving on, thanks to Zane having cut the gravity in the bay to accommodate Stross, who lived primarily in microgravity situations.

Jane explained it to me and Zane, as we took the elevator to the shuttle bay. Gamerans were humans—or at least, their DNA originated from human stock and had other things added in—radically sculpted and designed to live and thrive in airless space. To that end they had shelled bodies to protect them from vacuum and cosmic rays, symbiotic genetically altered algae stored in a special organ to provide them with oxygen, photosynthetic stripes to harness solar energy and hands on the ends of all their limbs. And, they were Special Forces soldiers. All those rumors in the general CDF infantry about wildly mutant Special Forces turned out to be more than rumors. I thought of my friend Harry Wilson, who I met when I first joined the CDF; he lived for this sort of stuff. I'd have to tell him the next time I saw him. If I ever saw him again.

Despite being a Special Forces soldier, Stross acted deeply informal, from his vocal mannerisms (*vocal* being a figurative term; vocal cords would be useless in space, so he didn't have any—his "voice" was generated in the BrainPal computer in his head and transmitted to our PDAs) to his apparent tendency to get distracted. There was a word for what he was.

Spacey.

Zane didn't waste any time on courtesy. "I want to know how the hell you got control of my ship," he said, to Stross.

"Blue pill," Stross said, still waving his hand about. "It's code that creates a virtual machine on your hardware. Your software runs on top of it, and never even knows it's not running on the hardware. That's why it can't tell anything's wrong."

"Get it off my computers," Zane said. "And then get off my boat."

Stross held open three of his hands, the other one still cutting air. "Do I look like a computer programmer to you?" he asked. "I don't know how to code it, I just know how to operate it. And my orders come from someone who outranks you. Sorry, Captain."

"How did you get here?" I asked. "I know you're adapted to space. But I'm pretty sure you don't have a Skip Drive in there."

"I hitched a ride with you," Stross said. "I've been sitting on the hull for the last ten days, waiting for you to skip." He tapped his shell. "Embedded nano-camo," he said. "Reasonably new trick. If I don't want you to notice me, you won't."

"You were on the hull for ten days?" I asked.

"It's not that bad," Stross said. "I kept busy by studying for my doctorate. Comparative literature. Keeps me busy. Distance learning, obviously."

"That's nice for you," Jane said. "But I'd prefer to focus on *our* situation." Her voice snapped out, cold, a counterpoint to Zane's hot fury.

"All right," Stross said. "I've just zapped the relevant files and orders to your PDAs, so you can peruse them at your leisure. But here's the deal: The planet you thought was Roanoke was a decoy. The planet you're over now is the *real* Roanoke colony. This is where you'll colonize."

"But we don't know anything about this planet," I said.

"It's all in the files," Stross said. "It's mostly a better planet for you than the other one. The life chemistry is right in line with our food needs. Well, *your* food needs. Not mine. You can start grazing right away."

"You said the other planet was a decoy," Jane said. "A decoy for what?"

"That's complicated," Stross said.

"Try me," Jane said.

"All right," Stross said. "For starters, do you know what the Conclave is?"

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FIVE

Jane looked like she'd been slapped.

"What? What is it? What is the Conclave?" I asked. I looked over to Zane, who opened his hands apologetically. He didn't know, either.

"They got it off the ground," Jane said, after a pause.

"Oh, yeah," Stross said.

"What is the Conclave?" I repeated.

"It's an organization of races," Jane said, still looking over at Stross. "The idea was to band together to control this part of space and to keep other races from colonizing." She turned to me. "The last I heard about it was just before you and I went to Huckleberry."

"You knew about this and you didn't tell me," I said.

"Orders," Jane said; it came out snappishly. "It was part of the deal I had. I got to leave the Special Forces on my terms, provided I forgot everything I'd ever heard about the Conclave. I couldn't have told you even if I had wanted to. And anyway, there was nothing to tell. Everything was still in the preliminary stages and from what I knew, it wasn't going anywhere. And I learned about it through Charles Boutin. He wasn't the most credible observer of interstellar politics."

Jane seemed genuinely angry; whether at me or the situation I couldn't tell. I decided not to push it and turned toward Stross. "But now the Conclave thing is a growing concern."

"It is," Stross said. "For over two years now. The first thing it did was warn every species who wasn't part of the Conclave not to colonize anymore."

"Or what?" Zane asked.

"Or the Conclave would wipe out their new colonies," Stross said. "That's the reason for the switcharoo here. We led the Conclave to believe we were forming a colony and settling it on one world. But in fact we sent the colony to another world entirely. One that isn't in the records or on the charts or that anyone knows about, other than a few very highly placed people. And me, because I'm here to tell you this. And now you. The Conclave was all set to attack Roanoke colony before you could even get your people on the ground. Now they can't attack you because they can't find you. It makes the Conclave look foolish and weak. And that makes *us* look better. That's the thinking as I understand it."

Now it was my turn to get angry. "So the Colonial Union is playing hide-and-seek with this Conclave," I said. "That's just *jolly*."

"*Jolly*'s a word," Stross said. "I don't think it'll be so jolly if they find you, though."

"And how long is that going to take?" I asked. "If this is as much of a blow to the Conclave as you say, they're going to come looking for us."

"You're right about that," Stross said. "And when they find you, they're going to wipe you out. So now it's our job to make you hard to find. And I think this is the part you're really not going to like."

"Point number one," I said, to the representatives of Roanoke colony. "No contact whatsoever between Roanoke colony and the rest of the Colonial Union."

The table erupted into chaos.

Jane and I sat on either ends, waiting for the fracas to calm. It took a few minutes.

"That's insane," said Marie Black.

"I agree entirely," I said. "But every time there's a contact between Roanoke and any other colony world, it leaves a trail back to us. Spaceships have crews that number in the hundreds. It's not realistic that none of those would talk to friends or spouses. And you all already know that people will be looking for us. Your former governments and

your families and the press will all be looking for someone who can give them a clue to where we are. If anyone can point a finger back to us, this Conclave will find us."

"What about the *Magellan*?" asked Lee Chen. "It's going back."

"Actually, no, it's not," I said. This news received a low gasp. I remembered the absolute fury in Captain Zane's face when Stross told him this bit of information. Zane threatened to disobey the order; Stross reminded him he had no control over the ships engines, and that if he and the crew didn't head to the surface with the rest of the colonists, they'd discover they had no control over life support, either. It was a fairly ugly moment.

It got worse when Stross told Zane the plan was to get rid of the *Magellan* by driving it right into the sun.

"The crew of the *Magellan* have families back in the CU," said Hiram Yoder. "Spouses. Children."

"They do," I said. "That will give you an idea how serious this is."

"Can we afford them?" asked Manfred Trujillo. "I'm not saying we refuse them. But the colony stores were meant for twenty-five hundred colonists. Now we're adding, what, another two hundred?"

"Two hundred and six," said Jane. "It's not a problem. We shipped with half again as much food stores as are usual for a colony this size, and this world has plant and animal life we can eat. Hopefully."

"How long will this isolation continue?" asked Black.

"Indefinitely," I said. Another grumble. "Our survival depends on isolation. It's just that simple. But in some ways that makes things easier. Seed colonies have to prepare for the next wave of colonists two or three years down the line. We don't have to worry about that now. We can focus on what our needs are. That'll make a difference."

There was glum agreement to this. For the moment that was the best I could hope for.

"Point two," I said, and tensed up for the backlash. "No use of technology that can give away the existence of our colony from space."

This time they didn't calm down after a few minutes.

"That's utterly ridiculous," said Paulo Gutierrez, eventually. "*Anything* that has a wireless connection is potentially detectible. All

you have to do is sweep with a broad-spectrum signal. It'll try to connect with anything and tell you what it finds."

"I understand that," I said.

"Our entire technology is wireless," Gutierrez said. He held up his PDA. "Look at this. Not a single goddamned wired input. You couldn't connect a wire to it if you tried. All our automated equipment in the cargo hold is wireless."

"Forget the equipment," said Lee Chen. "All of my colonists are carrying an implanted locator."

"So are mine," said Marta Piro. "And they don't have an off switch."

"You're going to have to dig them out, then," Jane said.

"That's a surgical procedure," Piro said.

"Where the hell did you put them?" Jane said.

"Our colonists' shoulders," Piro said. Chen nodded at this; his colonists had theirs in the shoulder as well. "It's not a major surgery, but it's still cutting into them."

"The alternative is exposing every other colonist to the risk of being found and killed," Jane said, clipping off her words. "I guess your people are just going to have to suffer." Piro started to open her mouth to respond, but then seemed to think better of it.

"Even if we dig out the locators, there's still every other piece of equipment we have," Gutierrez said, bringing the conversation back around to him. "It's all wireless. Farm equipment. Medical equipment. All of it. What you're telling us is that we can't use *any* of the equipment we need to survive."

"Not all the equipment in the cargo hold supports a wireless connection," Hiram Yoder said. "None of the equipment we brought with us does. It's all dumb equipment. It all needs a person behind the controls. We make it work just fine."

"You have the equipment," Gutierrez said. "We don't. The rest of us don't."

"We'll share everything we can," Yoder said.

"It's not a matter of sharing," Gutierrez spat. He took a second to calm himself. "I'm sure you would try to help us," he said to Hiram.

"But you brought enough equipment for *you*. There's ten times as many of the rest of us."

"We have the equipment," Jane said. Everyone at the table looked down toward her. "I've sent you all a copy of the ship manifest. You'll see that in addition to all the modern equipment we have, we were also provided with a full complement of tools and implements that were, until today, obsolete. This tells us two things. It tells us that the Colonial Union fully intended for us to be on our own. It also tells us that they don't intend for us to *die*."

"That's one spin on the subject," Trujillo said. "Another is that they knew they were going to abandon us to this Conclave and rather than give us anything we could use to defend ourselves, told us to keep quiet and keep our heads down, and maybe the Conclave won't *hear* us." There were murmurs of agreement around the table.

"Now's not the time for that discussion," I said. "Whatever the CU's rationale, the fact is we're here and we're not going anyplace else. When we're on the planet and have the colony sorted, then we can have a discussion on what the CU's strategy means. But for now, we need to focus on what we need to do to *survive*. Now, Hiram," I said, handing him my PDA. "Among all of us, you are the one who has the best idea of the capability of this equipment for our needs. Is this workable?"

Hiram took the PDA and scrolled through the manifest for several minutes.

"It's hard to say," he said finally. "I would need to see it in front of me. And I would need to see the people who would operate it. And there are so many other factors. But I think we could make it work." He looked up and down the table. "I tell all of you now that whatever I can do to help you, I will. I can't speak for all of my brethren on the matter, but I can tell you that in my experience each of them is ready to answer the call. We can do this. We can make it work."

"There's another option," Trujillo said. All eyes went to him. "We *don't* hide. We use all the equipment we have—all the resources we have—for our survival. When and *if* this Conclave comes calling, we tell it we're a wildcat colony. No affiliation with the CU. Its war is with the Colonial Union, not a wildcat colony."

"We'd be disobeying orders," said Marie Black.

"The disconnect works both ways," Trujillo said. "If we need to be isolated, the CU can't check up on us. And even if we are disobeying orders, so what? Are we in CDF? Are they going to shoot us? Are they going to *fire* us? And beyond that, do we here at this table honestly feel these orders are legitimate? The Colonial Union has abandoned us. What's more, they always *planned* to abandon us. They've broken faith with us. I say we do the same. I say we go wildcat."

"I don't think you know what you're saying when you say we should go wildcat," Jane said to Trujillo. "The last wildcat colony I was at had all its colonists slaughtered for food. We found the bodies of children in a stack, waiting to be butchered. Don't kid yourself. Going wildcat is a death sentence." Jane's statement hung in the air for several seconds, daring anyone to refute it.

"There are risks," Trujillo finally said, taking up the challenge. "But we're *alone*. We are a wildcat colony in everything but name. And we don't know that this Conclave of yours is as horrible as the Colonial Union has made it out to be. The CU has been deceiving us all this time. It has no credibility. We can't trust it to have our interests at heart."

"So you want proof the Conclave means us harm," Jane said.

"It'd be nice," Trujillo said.

Jane turned to me. "Show them," she said.

"Show us what?" asked Trujillo.

"This," I said. From my PDA—which I would soon no longer be able to use—I turned on the large wall monitor and fed it a video file. It showed a creature on a hill or bluff. Beyond the creature was what looked like a small town. It was bathed entirely in blinding light.

"The village you see is a colony," I said. "It was established by the Whaid, not long after the Conclave told the nonaffiliated races to stop colonizing. The Conclave jumped the gun, because it couldn't enforce its decree at the time. So some of the nonaffiliated races colonized anyway. But now the Conclave is catching up."

"Where is that light coming from?" asked Lee Chen.

"It's coming from the Conclave ships in orbit," Jane said. "It's a terror tactic. It disorients the enemy."

"There's got to be a lot of ships up there," Chen said.

"Yes," Jane said.

The beams of light illuminating the Whaidian colony suddenly snapped off.

"Here it comes," I said.

The killing beams were hardly detectable at first; they were tuned for destruction, not for show, and nearly all their energy went into their targets, not out to the camera. There was only a waver in the air from the sudden heat, visible even at the distance the camera sat.

Then, within a fraction of a second, the entire colony ignited and exploded. Superheated air blew the fragments and the dust of the colony's buildings, structures, vehicles and inhabitants up into the sky in a whirling display that illuminated the power of the beams themselves. The flickering fragments of matter mimicked and mirrored the flames that were now themselves reaching up toward the heavens.

A shock wave of heat and dust expanded out from the charred remains of the colony. The beams flickered off again. The light show in the sky disappeared, leaving behind smoke and flames. Outside the periphery of the destruction, an occasional solitary eruption of flame would appear.

"What is that?" asked Yoder.

"Some of the colonists were outside the colony when it was destroyed, we think," I said. "So they're cleaning them up."

"Christ," Gutierrez said. "With the colony destroyed those people would probably be dead anyway."

"They were making a point," Jane said.

I turned off the video. The room was dead silent.

Trujillo pointed at my PDA. "How did we get that?" he asked.

"The video?" I asked. He nodded. "Apparently, this was hand-delivered to the CU State Department, and to every non-Conclave-affiliated government, by messengers from the Conclave itself."

"Why would they do that?" Trujillo said. "Why would they show themselves committing an . . . *atrocity* like this?"

"So there's no doubt they mean what they say," I said. "What this says to me is that no matter what we think of the Colonial Union at the moment, we can't afford to work on the assumption that the Conclave will act reasonably toward us. The CU has thumbed its nose at these

guys, and they're not going to be able to ignore that. They're going to come looking for us. We don't want to give them an opportunity to find us." This was met with more silence.

"Now what?" asked Marta Piro.

"I think you need to have a vote," I said.

Trujillo looked up, a slight look of incredulity on his face. "I beg your pardon," he said. "I almost thought I heard *you* say *we* should have a vote."

"The plan on the table right now is the one we've just put in front of you," I said. "The one that was given to Jane and me. In light of everything, I think it's the best plan we've got for now. But it's not going to work if all of you don't agree. You are going to have to go back to your colonists to explain this. You are going to have to sell this to them. If this colony is going to work, everyone has to be on board with this. And that starts with all of you."

I stood up; Jane followed. "This is a discussion you need to have without us," I said. "We'll be waiting outside." We left.

"Is there something wrong?" I asked Jane, as we exited.

"Is that a serious question?" Jane snapped. "We're stranded outside of known space waiting for the Conclave to find us and burn us into the ground, and you're asking me if there's something *wrong*."

"I'm asking if there's something wrong with *you*," I said. "You were jumping down everyone's throat in there. We're in a bad situation but you and I need to stay focused. And diplomatic, if at all possible."

"You're the diplomatic one," Jane said.

"Fine," I said. "But you're not helping me."

Jane appeared to be counting to ten in her head. And then again. "I'm sorry," she said. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"Tell me what's going on," I said.

"Not now," Jane said. "Later. When we're by ourselves."

"We *are* by ourselves," I said.

"Turn around," Jane said. I turned. Savitri was there. I turned back to Jane, but she had walked away for a moment.

"Everything okay?" Savitri asked, watching Jane walk off.

"If I knew I would tell you," I said. I waited for a snappy comeback from Savitri. It didn't come, which in itself told me about Savitri's

frame of mind. "Has anyone noticed our planet problem?" I asked her.

"I don't think so," Savitri said. "Most people are like you—sorry—and they don't actually know what the planet looks like. Now, your absence has been noted. Yours and all the colony reps' as well. But no one seems to think there's anything sinister about it. You people are supposed to meet and talk about the colony, after all. I do know Kranjic is looking for you, but I think he's just looking for a quote from you about the celebration and the skip."

"Okay," I said.

"Anytime you want to tell me what else is going on, that would be fine, too," Savitri said. I started to give a rote, flip response and froze when I saw the look in her eye. "Soon, Savitri," I said. "I promise. We just have a couple things to work out."

"All right, boss," Savitri said. She relaxed just a little.

"Do me a favor," I said. "Track down Hickory or Dickory for me. I need to talk to them about something."

"You think they know something about this?" Savitri asked.

"I know they know something about this," I said. "I just need to find out how much they know. Tell them to meet me in my quarters later."

"Will do," Savitri said. "I'll find Zoë. They're always within a thirty-meter radius of her. I think it's beginning to annoy her, too. Seems they make her new boyfriend nervous."

"This would be that Enzo kid," I said.

"That's the one," Savitri said. "Nice boy."

"When we land I think I'll have Hickory and Dickory take him for a nice long walk," I said.

"I think it's interesting that in the middle of a crisis you can still think of ways to hamstring a boy sweet on your daughter," Savitri said. "In a twisted way it's almost admirable."

I grinned. Savitri grinned back, which was my hope and intent. "One has to have priorities," I said. Savitri rolled her eyes and left.

A few minutes later Jane reappeared, carrying two cups. She handed one to me. "Tea," she said. "Peace offering."

"Thanks," I said, taking it.

Jane motioned toward the door, where the colony reps were. "Any news?"

"Nothing," I said. "I haven't even been listening in."

"Do you have any plan for what you're going to do if they decide our plan is full of crap?" Jane asked.

"I'm glad you asked," I said. "I haven't the slightest idea what to do then."

"Thinking ahead, I see," Jane said, and sipped her tea.

"Don't sass me," I said. "That's Savitri's job."

"Look. Here comes Kranjic," Jane said, motioning down the hall, where the reporter had appeared, Beata as ever in tow. "If you want, I could just take him out for you."

"But that would leave Beata a widow," I said.

"I don't think she would mind," Jane said.

"We'll let him live for now," I said.

"Perry, Sagan," Kranjic said. "Look, I know I'm not your favorite person, but do you think you might give me a line or two about the skip? I promise I'll make you look nice."

The door to the conference room opened, and Trujillo looked out.

"Hold on, Jann," I said to Kranjic. "I'll have something for you in a minute." Jane and I went back into the conference room; I heard Kranjic give an audible sigh before we closed the door.

I turned to the colonist reps. "Well?" I asked.

"There wasn't much to discuss," Trujillo said. "We've decided that for now, at least, we should do as the Colonial Union suggested."

"Okay, good," I said. "Thank you."

"What we want to know from you now is what we should tell our people," Trujillo said.

"Tell them the truth," Jane said. "All of it."

"You were just saying how the CU has been deceiving us," I said to Trujillo. "Let's not go down the same road."

"You want us to tell them everything," Trujillo said.

"Everything," I said. "Hold that thought." I opened the door and called Kranjic. He and Beata entered the room. "Start with him," I said, gesturing to Kranjic.

They all looked at him.

"So," Kranjic said. "What's up?"

"The *Magellan*'s crew will be the last people down," I said to Jane. I had just come back from a logistics meeting with Zane and Stross; Jane and Savitri had been busy reprioritizing the colony's equipment based on our new situation. But for the moment, it was just me, Jane and Babar, who as a dog was happily resistant to the stress around him. "After they're down, Stross will set the *Magellan* to drive itself into the sun. No muss, no fuss, no sign of us."

"What's going to happen to Stross?" Jane said. She wasn't looking at me; she sat at the stateroom table, tapping it gently.

"He said he was going to 'hang out,' " I said. Jane looked up at me quizzically. I shrugged. "He's adapted to live in space," I said. "That's what he's going to do. He said his doctorate research would keep him busy until someone came to get him."

"He thinks someone is coming to get him," Jane said. "That's optimism for you."

"It's nice someone has optimism," I said. "Although Stross didn't really seem to be the pessimist type."

"Yeah," Jane said. Her tapping changed rhythm. "What about the Obin?"

"Oh, well," I said, remembering my earlier conversation with Hickory and Dickory. "*That*. Seems the two of them know all about the Conclave, but were forbidden from sharing the information because *we* didn't know anything about them. Basically, not unlike some spouses of mine I could name."

"I'm not going to apologize for that," Jane said. "It was part of the deal I made to be with you and Zoë. It seemed fair at the time."

"I'm not asking you to apologize," I said, as gently as I could. "I'm just frustrated. From what I read in the files Stross gave us this Conclave has hundreds of races in it. It's the single largest organization in the history of the universe as far as I can see. It's been coming together for decades, since back when I was on Earth. And I learned about its existence only now. I don't know how that's possible."

"You weren't meant to know," Jane said.

"This is something that spans all of our known space," I said. "You can't hide something like this."

"Of course you can," Jane said, and her tapping suddenly stopped. "The Colonial Union does it all the time. Think about how colonies communicate. They can't talk to each other directly; there's too much space between them. They have to compile their communication and send it in spaceships from one colony to another. The Colonial Union controls all ship travel in human space. All information bottlenecks into the Colonial Union. When you control communication, you can hide anything you want."

"I don't think that's really true," I said. "Sooner or later, everything leaks. Back on Earth—" Jane suddenly snorted. "What?" I asked.

"You," Jane said. " 'Back on Earth.' If any place in human space can be described as profoundly ignorant, it's Earth." She motioned her hand, encompassing the room. "How much of *any* of this did you know about, back on Earth? Think back. You and every other CDF recruit signed up completely ignorant of how things are out here. You didn't even know how they were going to make it possible for you to *fight*. The Colonial Union keeps Earth *isolated*, John. No communication with the rest of the human worlds. No information either way. The Colonial Union doesn't just hide the rest of the universe from Earth. It hides Earth from the rest of the universe."

"It's humanity's home," I said. "Of course the CU wants to keep its profile low."

"For fuck's sake," Jane said, genuinely irritated. "You can't possibly be so stupid as to believe that. The CU doesn't hide Earth because it has *sentimental value*. The CU hides Earth because it's a *resource*. It's a factory that spits out an endless supply of colonists and soldiers, none of whom has the smallest idea what's out *here*. Because it's not in the Colonial Union's interest to have them know. So they don't. *You* didn't. You were just as ignorant as the rest of them. So don't tell me you can't hide these things. The surprising thing isn't that the Colonial Union hid the Conclave from you. The surprising thing is that it's telling you about it at *all*."

Jane resumed her tapping for a moment and then slapped her hand down on the table, hard. "Fuck!" she said, and put her head in her

hands and sat there, clearly furious.

"I really want to know what's going on with you right now," I said.

"It's not you," she said. "I'm not angry with you."

"That's good to hear," I said. "Although since you just called me ignorant and stupid, you can understand why I wonder if you're telling me the truth about that."

Jane reached out a hand to me. "Come here," she said. I walked over to the table. She put my hand on it.

"I want you to do something for me," she said. "I want you to hit the table as hard as you can."

"Why?" I asked.

"Please," Jane said. "Just do it."

The table was standard carbon fiber with the veneer of printed wood: cheap, durable and not easily breakable. I made my hand into a fist and brought it down hard on the table. It made a muffled thump, and my forearm ached a bit from the impact. The table rattled a bit but was otherwise fine. From the bed, Babar looked over to see what idiocy I was up to.

"Ow," I said.

"I'm about as strong as you," Jane said, tonelessly.

"I suppose," I said. I stepped away from the table, rubbing my arm. "You're in better shape than me, though. You might be a bit stronger."

"Yeah," Jane said, and from her sitting position hammered her hand down on the table. The table broke with a report like a rifle shot. Half the tabletop sheared off and spun across the room, putting a divot in the door. Babar whined and backed himself up on the bed.

I gaped at my wife, who stared impassively at what remained of the table.

"That son of a bitch Szilard," she said, invoking the name of the head of the Special Forces. "He knew what they had planned for us. Stross is one of his people. So he had to know. He knew what we would be up against. And he decided to give me a Special Forces body, whether I wanted one or not."

"How?" I asked.

"We had lunch," Jane said. "He must have put them in my food." Colonial Defense Forces bodies were upgradable—to an extent—and

the upgrades were often accomplished with injections or infusions of nanobots that would repair and improve tissues. The CDF didn't use nanobots to repair normal human bodies, but there was no technical bar to doing it—or using the nanobots to make body changes. "It had to have been a tiny amount. Just enough to get them in me, where more could grow."

A light clicked on my head. "You had a fever."

Jane nodded, still not looking at me. "The fever. And I was hungry and dehydrated the entire time."

"When did you notice this?" I asked.

"Yesterday," Jane said. "I kept bending and breaking things. I gave Zoë a hug and I had to stop because she complained I was hurting her. I tapped Savitri on the shoulder and she wanted to know why I hit her. I felt clumsy all day. And then I saw *Stross*," Jane almost spat the name, "and I realized what it was. I wasn't clumsy, I was *changed*. Changed back to what I was. I didn't tell you, because I didn't think it mattered. But since then it's been in my head. I can't get it out of there. I'm changed."

Jane looked up at me, finally. Her eyes were wet. "I don't *want* this," she said, fiercely. "I left it when I chose a life with Zoë and with you. It was my choice to leave it, and it *hurt* to leave it. To leave everyone I knew behind." She tapped the side of her head to signify the BrainPal she no longer carried. "To leave their *voices* behind after having them with me. To be alone like that for the first time. It hurt to learn the limits of these bodies, to learn all the things I couldn't do anymore. I but *chose* it. Accepted it. Tried to see the beauty of it. And for the first time in my life I knew my life was more than what was directly in front of me. I learned to see the constellations, not just the stars. My life is your life and Zoë's life. All of our lives. All of it. It made it worth everything I left."

I went to Jane and held her. "It's all right," I said.

"No, it's not," Jane said. She gave a small, bitter laugh. "I know what Szilard was thinking, you know. He thought he was helping me—helping *us*—by making me more than human. He just doesn't know what I know. When you make someone more than human, you make

them less than human, too. I've spent all this time learning to be human. And he takes it away without a second thought."

"You're still you," I said. "That doesn't change."

"I hope you're right," Jane said. "I hope that it's enough."

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SIX

"This planet smells like an armpit," Savitri said.

"Nice," I said. I was still putting on my boots when Savitri had walked up. I finally yanked them on and stood.

"Tell me I'm wrong," Savitri said. Babar roused himself and walked over to Savitri, who gave him a pat.

"It's not that you're wrong," I said. "I just thought you might have a little more awe at being on an entirely new world."

"I live in a tent and pee in a bucket," Savitri said. "And then I have to carry the bucket across the entire camp to a processing tank so we can extract the urea for fertilizer. Maybe I'd have more awe for the planet if I didn't spend a fair portion of my day hauling my own waste across it."

"Try not to pee so much," I said.

"Oh, thanks," Savitri said. "You've just sliced through the Gordian knot with *that* solution. No wonder you're in charge."

"The bucket thing is only temporary, anyway," I said.

"That's what you told me two weeks ago," Savitri said.

"Well, I apologize, Savitri," I said. "I should have realized that two weeks is more than enough time for an entire colony to go from founding to baroque indolence."

"Not having to pee in a bucket is not indolence," Savitri said. "It's one of the hallmarks of civilization, along with having solid walls. And taking baths, which everyone in this colony has taken too few of recently, I'll tell you that."

"Now you know why the planet smells like an armpit," I said.

"It smelled like an armpit to start," Savitri said. "We're just adding to the funk."

I stood there and inhaled greatly through my nostrils, making a show of enjoying the air. Rather unfortunately for me, however, Savitri was right; Roanoke did, in fact, smell all too much like an armpit, so it was all that I could do not to gag after filling my lungs. That being said, I was enjoying the sour look on Savitri's face too much to admit to swooning from the smell.

"Aah," I said, exhaling. I managed not to cough.

"I hope you choke," Savitri said.

"Speaking of which," I said, and ducked back into the tent to retrieve my own nightpail, "I've got some business of my own to take care of. Walk with me to dump this?"

"I'd prefer not to," Savitri said.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I made that sound like a question. Come on." Savitri sighed and walked with me down the avenue of our little village of Croatoan, toward the waste digester, Babar tagging along at our heels, except when he broke off to say hello to kids. Babar was the only dog in the colony who was a herding dog; he had the time to make friends. This made him both popular and chunky.

"Manfred Trujillo told me that our little village is based on a Roman legion camp," Savitri said, as we walked.

"It's true," I said. "It was his idea, actually." And a good one. The village was rectangular, with three avenues running the length of the camp parallel to each other and a fourth avenue (Dare Avenue) bisecting them. In the center was a communal mess hall (in which our carefully monitored food supply was doled out in shifts), a small square where the kids and teens tried to keep themselves occupied and the administrative tent that doubled as home for me, Jane and Zoë.

On either side of Dare Avenue were rows of tents, each housing up to ten people, usually a pair of families plus any additional singles or couples we could stick in. Sure, it was inconvenient, but it was also crowded. Savitri had been bunked in a tent with three families of three, all of whom had infant and toddler-aged children; part of the reason for her sour disposition was that she was running on about three hours of

sleep a night. Since the days on Roanoke were twenty-five hours, eight minutes long, this wasn't a good thing.

Savitri pointed to the edge of the village. "I guess the Roman legions didn't use storage containers as a perimeter barrier," she said.

"Probably not," I said. "But that was their loss." Using the storage containers as a perimeter had been Jane's idea. In the Roman days, the legionnaires' camp would be encircled by a ditch and a palisade, to keep out the Huns and the wolves. We didn't have any Huns, or their equivalent (yet), but there had been some reports of large animals wandering out in the grass, and we also didn't want kids or teens (or certain incautious adults, who had already made their presence known) wandering off into the vegetation a klick away from the village. The storage containers were ideal for this purpose; they were tall and sturdy and there were lots of them—enough to circle the encampment twice, with appropriate spacing between the two layers to allow our angry, marooned cargo hold crew to unload inventory when needed.

Savitri and I made it to the western border of Croatoan, beyond which lay a small and fast stream. For that reason this edge of the village held its only plumbing so far. In the northwest corner a pipe carried in water to a filtration cistern, which churned out potable water for drinking and cooking; it also fed into two shower stalls at which a one-minute time limit for individuals (and three minutes for families) was strictly enforced by everyone else waiting in line. At the southwest corner was a septic digester—a small one, not the one Chief Ferro pointed out to me—into which every colonist dumped their nightpails. During the day they availed themselves of the portable toilets that surrounded the digester. There was almost always a line at these, too.

I walked over to the digester and poured the contents down a chute, holding my breath as I did so; the digester did not smell of roses. The digester took our waste and processed it into sterile fertilizer that was being collected and stored, and also into clean water, most of which was dumped into the stream. There was some discussion about whether to reroute the processed water back into the camp's supply; the general feeling was that clean or not, the colonists were under enough stress without having to drink or bathe in their own processed pee. It was a

fair point. A small amount of the water, however, was held back to rinse and clean the nightpails. It's life in the big city.

Savitri jerked her thumb down the west wall as I walked back to her. "Planning to shower anytime soon?" she asked. "I mean, no offense, but for you smelling like an armpit would be a step up."

"How long are you planning to be like this?" I asked.

"Until the very day I get indoor plumbing," Savitri said. "Which, in itself, would imply I had an indoor in which to put it."

"It's the Roanoke dream," I said.

"Which isn't going to be able to *start* until we get all these colonists out of this tent city and into their homesteads," Savitri said.

"You're not the first person to mention this to me," I said. I was about to say more but was interrupted as Zoë crossed our path. "There you are," she said, and then thrust her hand at me, which was filled with something. "Look. I found a pet," she said.

I looked at the something in her hand. It stared back. It looked a little like a rat that got caught in a taffy puller. Its most distinguishing characteristics were its four oval eyes, two on either side of its head, and the fact that it, like every other vertebrate creature we'd seen on Roanoke so far, had opposable thumbs on its three-fingered hands. It was using them to balance on Zoë's hand.

"Isn't he cute?" Zoë asked. The thing appeared to belch, which Zoë took as a sign to feed it a cracker she had stored in a pocket. It grabbed it with one hand and started chomping away.

"If you say so," I said. "Where did you find it?"

"There's a bunch of them outside the mess hall," Zoë said, showing it to Babar. He sniffed at the thing; it hissed back. "They've been watching us as we eat." This rang a bell with me; suddenly I was aware I had been seeing them too over the last week. "I think they were hungry," Zoë continued. "Gretchen and I went out to feed them, but they all ran away. Except for this guy. He came right up and took a cracker from me. I think I'll keep him."

"I'd prefer you didn't," I said. "You don't know where it's been."

"Sure I do," Zoë said. "He's been around the mess hall."

"You're missing my point," I said.

"I got your point, ninety-year-old dad," Zoë said. "But come on. If it were going to inject me with poison and try to eat me, it probably would have done it by now." The thing in her hand finished its cracker and burped again, and then suddenly leapt out of Zoë's hand and scurried off in the direction of the storage container barricade. "Hey!" Zoë cried.

"Loyal like a puppy, that thing is," I said.

"When he comes back, I'm going to tell him all the horrible things you've said," Zoë said. "And then I'm going to let him poo on your head."

I tapped the nightpail. "No, no," I said. "That's what this is for."

Zoë curled her lip at the sight of the nightpail; she was not a big fan. "Yuck. Thanks for the image."

"Don't mention it," I said. Out of the blue, it struck me that Zoë was missing a couple of shadows. "Where are Hickory and Dickory?" I asked.

"Mom asked them to come with her to look at something," Zoë said. "Which is actually why I came looking for you. She wanted you to come look at something. She's on the other side of the barricade. By the north entrance."

"All right," I said. "Where will you be?"

"I'll be in the square, of course," Zoë said. "Where else *is* there to be?"

"Sorry, honey," I said. "I know you and your friends are bored."

"No kidding," Zoë said. "We all knew colonization was supposed to be difficult, but no one told us it was going to be *boring*."

"If you're looking for something to do, we could start up a school," I said.

"We're bored, so you suggest *school*?" Zoë said. "Who *are* you? Also, not likely, since you've confiscated all our PDAs. It's going to be hard to teach us anything when we don't have lessons."

"The Mennonites have books," I said. "Old-fashioned ones. With pages and everything."

"I know," Zoë said. "They're the only ones not going completely insane with boredom, too. God, I miss my PDA."

"The irony must be crushing," I said.

"I'm going to leave you now," Zoë said. "Before I throw a rock at you." Despite the threat, she gave me and Savitri a quick hug before she left. Babar walked off with her; she was more fun.

"I know how she feels," Savitri said, as we resumed walking.

"You want to throw a rock at me, too?" I said.

"Sometimes," Savitri said. "Not right now. No, about missing her PDA. I miss mine, too. Look at this." Savitri reached into her back pants pocket and pulled out a spiral notebook, a small stack of which had been made a gift to her by Hiram Yoder and the Mennonites. "This is what I'm reduced to."

"Savage," I said.

"Joke all you want," Savitri said, and she put the notebook back. "Going from a PDA to a notepad is *hard*."

I didn't argue with this. Instead, we walked out the north gate of the village, where we found Jane with Hickory and Dickory, and two members of the *Magellan*'s security complement whom she had deputized. "Come look at this," she said, and walked over to one of the storage containers on the perimeter.

"What am I looking for?" I asked.

"These," Jane said, and pointed at the container, near the top, about three meters up.

I squinted. "Those are scratches," I said.

"Yes. We've found them on other containers, too. And there's more," Jane said, and walked over to two other containers. "Something's been digging here," she said. "It looks like something's been trying to dig under these containers."

"Good luck with that," I said. The containers were more than two meters in width.

"We found one hole on the other side of the perimeter that was nearly a meter in length," Jane said. "Something's trying to get in at night. It can't jump over the containers, so it's trying to go under instead. And it's not just one. We've got lots of vegetation tramped down around here, and lots of different-sized paw prints on the containers. Whatever they are, they're in a pack."

"Are these the big animals folks have seen in the brush?" I asked.

Jane shrugged. “No one’s seen any of them close up, and nothing comes around here during the day. Normally, we’d post infrared cameras up at the top of the containers, but we can’t here.” Jane didn’t have to explain why; the sentry cameras, like almost every other piece of technology we owned, communicated wirelessly, and wireless was a security risk. “And whatever they are, they’re avoiding being seen by the night sentry. But the night sentry isn’t using nightscopes, either.”

“Whatever they are, you think they’re dangerous,” I said.

Jane nodded. “I don’t see herbivores being this dedicated to getting inside. Whatever’s out here sees us and smells us and wants to get in to see what we’re like. We need to find out what they are and how many of them there are.”

“If they’re predators, their numbers are limited,” I said. “Too many predators will deplete the stock of prey.”

“Yes,” Jane said. “But that still doesn’t tell us how many there are or what sort of threat they are. All we know is that they’re out here at night, and they’re big enough to almost be able to jump the containers, and smart enough to try tunneling under. We can’t let people begin to homestead until we know what sort of threat they represent.”

“Our people are armed,” I said. Among the supplies was a store of ancient, simple rifles and non-nanobotic ammunition.

“Our people have firearms,” Jane said. “But most of them haven’t the slightest idea how to use them. They’re going to end up shooting themselves before they shoot anything else. And it’s not only humans at risk. I’m more concerned about our livestock. We can’t really afford to lose many of them to predators. Not this early.”

I looked out toward the brush. Between me and the tree line, one of the Mennonite men was instructing a group of other colonists on the finer points of driving an old-fashioned tractor. Farther out a couple of colonists were collecting soil so we could check its compatibility with our crops. “That’s not going to be a very popular position,” I said to Jane. “People are already complaining about being cooped up in town.”

“It won’t take that long to find them,” Jane said. “Hickory and Dickory and I are going to take the watch tonight, up on top of the containers. Their eyesight drops down into the infrared range, so they might see them coming.”

"And you?" I asked. Jane shrugged. After her revelation back on the *Magellan* about being reengineered, she'd kept mostly quiet about the full range of her abilities. But it wasn't a stretch to assume her visual range had expanded like the rest of her abilities. "What are you going to do when you spot them?" I asked.

"Tonight, nothing," Jane said. "I want to get an idea of what they are and how many there are. We can decide what we're going to do then. But until then we should make sure everyone is inside the perimeter an hour before sunset and that anyone outside the perimeter during the day has an armed guard." She nodded to her human deputies. "These two have weapons training, and there are several others in the *Magellan* crew who have as well. That's a start."

"And no homesteading until we get a grip on these things," I said.

"Right," Jane said.

"It'll make for a fun Council meeting," I said.

"I'll break it to them," Jane said.

"No," I said. "I should do it. You already have the reputation as the scary one. I don't want you always being the one who bears the bad news."

"It doesn't bother me," Jane said.

"I know," I said. "It doesn't mean you should always do it, though."

"Fine," Jane said. "You can tell them that I expect we'll know quickly enough whether these things represent a threat. That should help."

"We can hope," I said.

"Don't we have any information on these creatures?" Manfred Trujillo asked. He and Captain Zane walked beside me now as I headed toward the village's information center.

"No," I said. "We don't even know what they look like yet. Jane's going to find out tonight. So far the only creatures we know anything about are those rat-things at the mess hall."

"The fuglies," Zane said.

"The what?" I asked.

"The fuglies," Zane said. "That's what the teenagers are calling them. Because they're fucking ugly."

"Nice name," I said. "Point is, I don't think we can claim to have a full understanding of our biosphere from the fuglies alone."

"I know you see value in being cautious," Trujillo said. "But people are getting restless. We've brought people to a place they know nothing about, told them they can't ever talk to their families and friends again, and then given them nothing to do for two entire weeks. We're in limbo. We need to get people going on the next phase of their lives, or they're going to keep dwelling on the fact that their lives as they knew them have been entirely taken away."

"I know," I said. "But you know as well as I do we've got *nothing* on this world. You two have seen the same files I have. Whoever did the so-called survey of this planet apparently didn't bother to spend more than ten minutes on it. We've got the basic biochemistry of the planet and that's pretty much it. We've got almost no information on flora and fauna, or even if it breaks down *into* flora and fauna. We don't know if the soil will grow our crops. We don't know what native life we can eat or use. All information the Department of Colonization usually provides a new colony, we don't have. We have to find all this stuff out for our own *before* we start, and unfortunately in that we've got a pretty big handicap."

We arrived at the information center, which was a grand name for the cargo container we'd modified for the purpose. "After you," I said, holding the first set of doors for Trujillo and Zane. Once we were all in, I sealed the door behind me, allowing the nanobotic mesh to completely envelop the outer door, turning it a featureless black, before opening the interior door. The nanobotic mesh had been programmed to absorb and cloak electromagnetic waves of all sorts. It covered the walls, floor and ceiling of the container. It was unsettling if you thought about it; it was like being in the exact center of nothing.

The man who had designed the mesh waited inside the center's interior door. "Administrator Perry," Jerry Bennett said. "Captain Zane. Mr. Trujillo. Nice to see you back in my little black box."

"How is the mesh holding up?" I asked.

"Good," Bennett said, and pointed at the ceiling. "No waves get in, no waves get out. Schrödinger would be jealous. I need more cells, though. The mesh sucks power like you wouldn't believe. Not to mention all the rest of this equipment." Bennett motioned to the rest of the technology in the center. Because of the mesh, it was the only place on Roanoke where there was technology that you wouldn't find past the middle of the twentieth century on Earth, save power technology that did not run on fossil fuels.

"I'll see what I can do," I said. "You're a miracle worker, Bennett."

"Nah," he said. "I'm just your average geek. I've got those soil reports you wanted." He handed over a PDA, and I fondled it for a moment before looking at the screen. "The good news is the soil samples I've seen so far look good for our crops in a general sense. There's nothing in the soil that will kill them or stunt their growth, at least chemically. Each of the samples was crawling with little critters, too."

"Is that a bad thing?" Trujillo asked.

"Got me," Bennett said. "What I know about soil management I read as I was processing these samples. My wife did a little gardening back on Phoenix and seemed to be of the opinion that having a bunch of bugs was good because they aerated the soil. Who knows, maybe she's right."

"She's right," I said. "Having a healthy amount of biomass is usually a good thing." Trujillo looked at me skeptically. "Hey, I farmed," I said. "But we also don't know how these creatures will react to our plants. We're introducing new species into a biosphere."

"You're officially beyond anything I know about the subject, so I'll move on," Bennett said. "You asked if there was any way for me to adapt the technology we have to switch off the wireless components. Do you want the long or short answer?"

"Let's start with the short answer," I said.

"Not really," Bennett said.

"Okay," I said. "Now I need the long answer."

Bennett reached over and grabbed a PDA that he had earlier pried apart, lifted the top off it and handed it to me. "This PDA is a fairly standard piece of Colonial Union technology. Here you see all the

components; the processor, the monitor, the data storage, the wireless transmitter that lets it talk to other PDAs and computers. Not a single one of them is physically connected to any of the other parts. Every part of this PDA connects wirelessly to every other part."

"Why do they do it that way?" I asked, turning the PDA over in my hands.

"Because it's cheap," Bennett said. "You can make tiny data transmitters for next to nothing. It costs less than using physical materials. They don't cost much either, but in aggregate there's a real cost differential. So nearly every manufacturer goes that way. It's design by accountant. The only physical connections in the PDA are from the power cell to the individual components, and again that's because it's cheaper to do it that way."

"Can you use those connections to send data?" Zane said.

"I don't see how," Bennett said. "I mean, sending data over a physical connection is no problem. But getting into each of these components and flashing their command core to do it that way is beyond my talents. Aside from the programming skills, there's the fact each manufacturer locks out access to the command core. It's proprietary data. And even if I could do all that, there's no guarantee it would work. Among everything else, you'd be routing everything through the power cell. I'm not sure how you get that to work."

"So even if we turn off all the wireless transmitters, every one of these is still leaking wireless signals," I said.

"Yeah," Bennett said. "Across very short distances—no more than a few centimeters—but, yeah. If you're really looking for this sort of thing, you could detect it."

"There's a certain point at which this all becomes futile," Trujillo said. "If someone's listening for radio signals this weak, there's a pretty good chance they're scanning the planet optically as well. They're just going to *see* us."

"Hiding ourselves from sight is a difficult fix," I said to Trujillo. "This is an easy fix. Let's work on the easy fixes." I turned to Bennett, and handed back his PDA. "Let me ask you something else," I said. "Could you *make* wired PDAs? Ones without wireless parts or transmitters?"

"I'm sure I could find a design for one," Bennett said. "There are public domain blueprints. But I'm not exactly set up for manufacturing. I could go through everything we have and cobble up something. Wireless parts are the rule but there are some things that are still wired up. But we're never going to get to a place where everyone's walking around with a computer, much less being able to replace the onboard computers on most of the equipment we have. Honestly, outside this black box, we're not getting out of the early twentieth century any time soon."

All of us digested that for a moment. "Can we at least expand *this*?" Zane finally asked, motioning around him.

"I think we should," Bennett said. "In particular I think we need to build a black box medical bay, because Dr. Tsao keeps distracting me when I'm trying to get work done."

"She's hogging your equipment," I said.

"No, she's just really cute," Bennett said. "And that's going to get me in trouble with the wife. But also, I've only got a couple of her diagnostic machines in here, and if we ever have a real medical problem, we're going to want more available."

I nodded. We'd already had one broken arm, from a teenager climbing up on the barrier and then slipping off. He was lucky not to have broken his neck. "Do we have enough mesh?" I asked.

"This is pretty much our entire stock," Bennett said. "But I can program it to make some more of itself. I'd need some more raw material."

"I'll have Ferro get on that," Zane said, referring to the cargo chief. "We'll see what we have in inventory."

"Every time I see him, he seems really pissed," Bennett said.

"Maybe it's because he's supposed to be at home and not here," Zane snapped. "Maybe he doesn't much like being kidnapped by the Colonial Union." Two weeks had not served to make the captain any more mellow about the destruction of his ship or the stranding of his crew.

"Sorry," Bennett said.

"I'm ready to go," Zane said.

"Two quick things," Bennett said to me. "I'm almost done printing most of the data files you were given when we came here, so you can have those in hard copy. I can't print the video and audio files, but I'll run them through a processor to get you transcripts."

"Okay, good," I said. "What was the second thing?"

"I went around the camp with a monitor like you asked and looked for wireless signals," Bennett said. Trujillo raised an eyebrow at this. "The monitor is solid state," Bennett said to him. "Doesn't send, only receives. Anyway, I think you should know there are three wireless devices still out there. And they're still transmitting."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," Jann Kranjic said.

For not the first time, I restrained the urge to punch Kranjic in the temple. "Do we really need to do this the hard way, Jann?" I said. "I'd like to pretend we're not twelve years old and that we're not having an 'am to, am not' sort of conversation."

"I turned over my PDA just like everyone else did," Kranjic said, and then motioned back to Beata, who was lying on her cot, a washcloth over her eyes. Beata was apparently prone to migranes. "And Beata turned in her PDA and her camera cap. You have everything we have."

I glanced over at Beata. "Well, Beata?" I said.

Beata raised the edge of her washcloth and looked over, wincing. Then she sighed and reapplied her washcloth. "Check his underwear," she said.

"Excuse me?" I said.

"Beata," Kranjic said.

"His underwear," Beata said. "At least one pair has a pouch in the elastic that hides a small recorder. He's got a pin of the Umbrian flag that's an audio/video input. He's probably got it on right now."

"You bitch," Kranjic said, subconsciously covering his pin. "You're fired."

"That's funny," Beata said, pressing the washcloth against her eyes. "We're a thousand light-years from anywhere, we have no chance of

ever getting back to Umbria, you spend your days reciting overblown notes into your underwear for a book you'll never write, and I'm *fired*. Get a grip, Jann."

Kranjic stood to make a dramatic exit. "Jann," I said, and held out my hand. Jann snatched off his pin and pressed it into my palm.

"Want my underwear now?" He sneered.

"Keep the underwear," I said. "Just give me the recorder."

"Years from now, people are going to want to know the story of this colony," Kranjic said, as he fumbled with his underwear from inside his trousers. "They're going to want to know the story, and when they go looking for it, they're not going to find anything. And they're not going to find anything because its leaders spent their time censoring the only member of the press in the entire colony."

"Beata's a member of the press," I said.

"She's a *camerawoman*," Kranjic said, slapping over the recorder. "It's not the same thing."

"I'm not censoring you," I said. "I just can't allow you to jeopardize the colony. I'm going to take this recorder and have Jerry Bennett print you out a transcript of the notes, in very tiny type, because I don't want to waste paper. So you'll have these notes. And if you go find Savitri you can tell her I asked her to give you one of her notepads. *One*, Jann. She needs the rest for our work. Then if you need any more you can see what the Mennonites have to say about it."

"You want me to write out my notes," Kranjic said. "In longhand."

"It worked for Samuel Pepys," I said.

"You're assuming Jann knows how to write," Beata mumbled from her cot.

"Bitch," Kranjic said, and left the tent.

"It's a stormy marriage," Beata said laconically.

"Apparently," I said. "You want a divorce?"

"Depends," Beata said, raising her washcloth again. "Think your assistant would be up for a date?"

"In the entire time I've known her I haven't known her to date anyone," I said.

"So that's a 'no,' " Beata said.

"It's a 'hell if I know,' " I said.

"Hmmmm," Beata said, dropping the cloth back down. "Tempting. But I'll stay married for now. It irritates Jann. After all the irritation he's provided me over the years, it's nice to return the favor."

"Stormy marriage," I said.

"Apparently," Beata said.

"We must refuse," Hickory said to me. It and Dickory and I were in the Black Box. I figured that when I told the two Obin that they needed to give up their wireless consciousness implants, they should be allowed to be conscious to hear it.

"You've never refused an order of mine before," I said.

"None of your orders has ever violated our treaty," Hickory said. "Our treaty with the Colonial Union allows the two of us to be with Zoë. It also allows us to record those experiences and share them with other Obin. Ordering us to surrender our consciousness interferes with this. It violates our treaty."

"You could choose to surrender your implants," I said. "That would solve the problem."

"We would not choose to," Hickory said. "It would be an abdication of our responsibility to the other Obin."

"I could tell Zoë to tell you to give them up," I said. "I can't imagine you'd ignore her order."

Hickory and Dickory leaned in together for a moment, then leaned out again. "That would be distressful," Hickory said. I reflected that it was the first time I had ever heard that word provide such apocalyptic gravity.

"You understand I have no desire to do this," I said. "But our orders from the Colonial Union are clear. We can't let anything provide easy evidence we're on this world. The Conclave will exterminate us. All of us, including, you two and Zoë."

"We have considered the possibility," Hickory said. "We believe the risk to be negligible."

"Remind me to show you a little video I have," I said.

"We have seen it," Hickory said. "It was provided to our government as well as yours."

"How can you see that and *not* see that the Conclave represents a threat to us?" I asked.

"We viewed the video carefully," Hickory said. "We believe the risk to be negligible."

"It's not your decision to make," I said.

"It is," Hickory said. "By our treaty."

"I am the legal authority on this planet," I said.

"You are," Hickory said. "But you may not abrogate a treaty for your convenience."

"Not getting an entire colony slaughtered is not a *convenience*," I said.

"Removing all wireless devices to avoid detection is a convenience," Hickory said.

"Why don't you ever talk?" I said to Dickory.

"I have yet to disagree with Hickory," Dickory said.

I stewed.

"We have a problem," I said. "I can't force you to surrender your implants, but I can't let you run around with them, either. Answer me this: Is it a violation of your treaty for me to require you to stay *here*, in this room, so long as I have Zoë visit you on a regular basis?"

Hickory thought about it. "No," it said. "It is not what we prefer."

"It's not what I prefer, either," I said. "But I don't think I have a choice."

Hickory and Dickory conferred again for several minutes. "This room is covered in wave-masking material," Hickory said. "Give us some. We can use use it to cover our devices and ourselves."

"We don't have any more right now," I said. "We need to make more. It might take some time."

"As long as you agree to this solution we will accommodate the production time," Hickory said. "During that time we will not use our implants outside this room, but you will ask Zoë to visit us here."

"Fine," I said. "Thank you."

"You are welcome," Hickory said. "Maybe this will be for the best. Since we have been here, we have noticed she has not had as much time for us."

"She's being a teenager," I said. "New friends. New planet. New boyfriend."

"Yes. Enzo," Hickory said. "We feel deeply ambivalent about him."

"Join the club," I said.

"We can remove him," Hickory said.

"Really, no," I said.

"Perhaps later," Hickory said.

"Rather than killing off Zoë's potential suitors, I'd prefer the two of you focus on helping Jane find whatever it is that's out there pawing on our perimeter," I said. "It's probably less emotionally satisfying, but in the grand scheme of things, it's going to be more useful."

Jane plopped the thing down on the floor of the Council meeting. It looked vaguely like a large coyote, if coyotes had four eyes and paws with opposable thumbs. "Dickory found this one inside one of the excavations. There were two others with it but they ran off. Dickory killed this one as it was trying to get away."

"He shot it?" asked Marta Piro.

"He killed it with a knife," Jane said. This caused some uneasy muttering; most of the Council and colonists were still deeply uncomfortable with the Obin.

"Do you think this is one of the predators you were concerned about?" Manfred Trujillo asked.

"It might be," Jane said.

"Might be," Trujillo said.

"The paws are the right shape for the marks we've seen," Jane said. "But it seems small to me."

"But small or not, something like this could have made the marks," Trujillo said.

"It's possible," Jane said.

"Have you seen any larger ones?" asked Lee Chen.

"No," Jane said, and looked over to me. "I've been out on the night watch on the last three days and last night was the first time we've seen anything approach the barrier at all."

"Hiram, you've been out past the barrier almost every day," Trujillo said. "Have you seen anything like this?"

"I've seen some animals," Hiram said. "But they've been plant eaters, as far as I could see. I haven't seen anything that looks like this thing. But then I've not been out past the barrier at night, either, and Administrator Sagan here thinks these are active during the night."

"But she hasn't seen any more of them," Marie Black said. "We're holding off settling because of phantoms."

"The scratches and holes were real enough," I said.

"I'm not arguing that," Black said. "But maybe they were isolated incidents. Perhaps a pack of these animals was just passing through several days ago and was curious about the barrier. Once they couldn't get through, they moved on."

"It's possible," Jane said again. From her tone I could tell she didn't think much of Black's theory.

"How much longer are we going to hold off on settling because of this?" Paulo Gutierrez asked. "I've got people who are going insane waiting for us to stop farting around. The last few days people have started getting in each other's faces about idiotic things. And we're running against time now, aren't we? It's spring here now, and we've got to start planting crops and readying grazing fields for the livestock. We've already eaten through two weeks of food. If we don't start colonizing, we're going to be in deep shit."

"We haven't been farting around," I said. "We've been dropped onto a planet about which we know nothing. We had to take the time to make sure it wasn't going to flat-out kill us."

"We're not dead yet," Trujillo said, interjecting himself. "So that's a good sign. Paolo, step back for a minute. Perry is absolutely right. We couldn't have just wandered out into this planet and started setting up farms. But Paolo's right, too, Perry. We're at a point where we can't stay stuck behind a barricade. Sagan's had three days to find more evidence of these creatures, and we've killed one of them. We need to be cautious, yes. And we need to keep studying Roanoke. But we need to get colonizing, too."

The entire Council was staring at me, waiting to hear what I would say. I glanced over at Jane, who gave one of her nearly imperceptible

shrugs. She wasn't entirely convinced that there wasn't a real threat out there, but aside from the one dead creature, she had nothing definitive. And Trujillo was right; it was time to get colonizing.

"Agreed," I said.

"You let Trujillo take that meeting away from you," Jane said, as we got ready for bed. She kept her voice low; Zoë was already asleep. Hickory and Dickory were standing impassively on the other side of our screen in the administrative tent. They were wearing full body suits made from the first bolt of the newly produced nanobotic mesh. The suits locked in the wireless signals; they also turned the Obin into walking shadows. They might have been asleep as well; it was hard to tell.

"I suppose I did," I said. "Trujillo's a professional politician. He'll do that sometimes. Especially when he's right. We do need to move on getting people out of the village."

"I want to make sure each wave of homesteaders has some weapons training," Jane said.

"I think that's a fine idea," I said. "You're not likely to convince the Mennonites, however."

"I have concerns about that," Jane said.

"You're just going to have to be concerned, then," I said.

"They're our knowledge base," Jane said. "They're the ones who know how to operate all the nonautomated machinery and make things without pressing buttons. I don't want them getting eaten."

"If you want to keep an extra close watch on the Mennonites, I don't have a problem with that," I said. "But if you think you're going to get them to stop being who they are, you're in for a surprise. And it's because of who they are that they're in a position to save our collective bacon."

"I don't understand religion," Jane said.

"It makes more sense from the inside," I said. "Anyway, you don't have to understand it. You just have to respect it."

"I respect it," Jane said. "I also respect the fact this planet still has ways to kill us we haven't figured out yet. I wonder if other people respect that."

"There's one way to find out," I said.

"You and I haven't talked about whether we plan to do any farming ourselves," Jane said.

"I don't think it would be a smart use of our time," I said. "We're colony administrators now, and we don't have automated equipment here we can use. We'll be busy enough. After Croatoan empties out a bit we'll build a nice little house. If you want to grow things, we can have a garden. We *should* have a garden anyway, for our own fruits and vegetables. We can put Zoë in charge of it. Give her something to do."

"I want to grow flowers, too," Jane said. "Roses."

"Really," I said. "You've never really been into pretty things before."

"It's not that," Jane said. "This planet smells like an armpit."

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SEVEN

Roanoke revolves around its sun every 305 days. We decided to give the Roanoke year eleven months, seven with twenty-nine days and four with thirty. We named a month for each of the colony worlds our settlers came from, plus one for the *Magellan*. We dated the first day of the year to the day we arrived above Roanoke, and named the first month Magellan. The *Magellan* crew was touched, which was good, but by the time we named the months, it was already Magellan twenty-ninth. Their month was already almost over. They weren't entirely pleased about that.

Shortly after our decision to start allowing the colonists to homestead, Hiram Yoder approached me for a private meeting. It was clear, he said, that the majority of the colonists were not qualified to farm; they had all trained on modern farming equipment and were having difficulties with the more labor-intensive farm equipment the Mennonites were familiar with. Our stores of fast-growing, genetically modified seed would allow us to begin harvesting crops within two months—but only if we knew what we were doing. We didn't, and we were looking a potential famine in the face.

Yoder suggested we allow the Mennonites to cultivate crops for the entire colony, thus ensuring that the colony wouldn't turn into an interstellar Donner party three months down the line; the Mennonites would apprentice the other colonists so they could receive on-the-job training. I readily agreed to this. By the second week of Albion, the Mennonites had taken our soil studies and used them to plant fields of

wheat, maize and any other number of vegetables; they woke honeybees from their slumber to begin doing their pollination dance, pastured the livestock and were teaching the colonists of nine other worlds (and one ship) the advantages of intensive and companion planting, carbon and calorie farming and the secrets of maximizing yields in the smallest amount of space. I began to relax a little; Savitri, who had been making jokes about "long pig," found something new to snark about.

In Umbria, the fuglies discovered that fast-growing potatoes were good eatin', and we lost several acres in the space of three days. We had our first agricultural pest. We also completed the medical bay, with all its equipment in its own black box. Dr. Tsao was delighted when within hours she was using her surgery 'bot to reattach a finger a colonist had inadvertently sliced off with a bandsaw during a barn raising.

In the first weekend of Zhong Guo, I presided over Roanoke's first wedding, between Katherine Chao, formerly of Franklin, and Kevin Jones, formerly of Rus. There was much rejoicing. Two weeks later I presided over Roanoke's first divorce, fortunately not of Chao and Jones. Beata had finally gotten her fill of antagonizing Jann Kranjic and let him off the hook. There was much rejoicing.

By Erie tenth, we had finished our first major crop harvests. I declared a national holiday and day of thanksgiving. The colonists celebrated by building the Mennonites a meeting house, for which they only occasionally needed to ask for advice from the Mennonites themselves. The second set of crops was into the ground less than a week later.

In Khartoum, Patrick Kazumi went with his friends to play by the stream behind Croatoan's western wall. While running along the stream, he slipped, hit his head on a rock and drowned. He was eight years old. Most of the colony attended his funeral. On the last day of Khartoum, Anna Kazumi, Patrick's mother, stole a heavy coat from a friend, placed rocks in her pockets and waded into the stream to follow her son. She succeeded.

In Kyoto, it rained heavily four days out of every five, spoiling crops and interfering with the colony's second harvest of the year. Zoë and Enzo had a somewhat dramatic breakup, as often happens when

first loves finally get on each other's nerves. Hickory and Dickory, overstimulated from Zoë's relationship angst, began openly discussing how to solve the Enzo problem. Zoë finally told the two to stop it; they were creeping her out.

In Elysium, the yotes, the coyote-like predators we'd discovered on our barrier, made their way back toward the colony, and attempted to work their way through the colony's herd of sheep, a ready source of food. Colonists began working their way through the predators in return. Savitri relented after three months and went on a date with Beata. The next day Savitri described the evening as an "interesting failure" and refused to discuss it further.

With Roanoke autumn in full swing, the last of the temporary housing tents folded for good, replaced with simple, snug houses in Croatoan and on the homesteads outside its walls. Half of the colonists still lived in Croatoan, learning trades from the Mennonites; the other half carved out their homesteads and waited for the new year to plant their own fields and yield their own crops.

Savitri's birthday—as measured on Huckleberry, translated to Roanoke dates—occurred on the twenty-third of Elysium; I gave her the gift of an indoor toilet for her tiny cottage, connected to a small and easily-drained septic tank. Savitri actually teared up.

On the thirteenth of Rus, Henri Arlien battered his wife Therese on the belief that she was having an affair with a former tentmate. Therese responded by battering her husband with a heavy pan, breaking his jaw and knocking out three of his teeth. Both Henri and Therese visited Dr. Tsao; Henri then visited the hastily assembled jail, formerly a livestock hold. Therese asked for a divorce and then moved in with the former tentmate. She hadn't been having an affair before, she said, but now it sounded like a damn fine idea indeed.

The tentmate was a fellow by the name of Joseph Loong. On the twentieth of Phoenix, Loong went missing.

"First things first," I said to Jane, after Therese Arlien came in to report Loong's disappearance. "Where has Henri Arlien been recently?"

"He's on work furlough during the day," Jane said. "The only time he's allowed to be by himself is when he has to pee. At night he's back in his stall at the jail."

"That stall's not exactly escape-proof," I said. In its former life it had held a horse.

"No," Jane said. "But the livestock hold is. One door, one lock, and it's on the outside. He doesn't get anywhere overnight."

"He could get a friend to visit Loong," I said.

"I don't think Arlien has friends," Jane said. "Chad and Ari took statements from their neighbors. Pretty much all of them said Henri had got what he deserved when Therese hit him with that pan. I'll have Chad check around, but I don't think we'll get much there."

"What do you think, then?" I asked.

"Loong's homestead borders the woods," Jane said. "Therese said the two of them had gone for walks out there. The fanties are migrating through the area, and Loong wanted to get a closer look." The fanties were the lumbering animals some of the folks saw at the edge of the woods not long after we landed; apparently they migrated, looking for food. We had caught the tail end of their stay when we arrived; now it was the early part. I thought they looked about as much like elephants as I did, but the name had stuck whether I liked it or not.

"So Loong goes out to look at the fanties and gets lost," I said.

"Or gets trampled," Jane said. "The fanties are large animals."

"Well, then, let's get a search party together," I said. "If Loong just got lost, if he has any sense, he'll stay put and wait for us to find him."

"If he had any sense he wouldn't be chasing after fanties in the first place," Jane said.

"You'd be no fun on a safari," I said.

"Experience teaches me not to go out of my way to chase alien creatures," Jane said. "Because they often chase back. I'll have a search party together in an hour. You should come along."

The search party began its search just before noon. It was a hundred and fifty volunteers strong; Henri Arlien may not have been popular but both Therese and Loong had a number of friends. Therese came to

join the party but I sent her home with two of her friends. I didn't want to run the risk of her coming across Joe's body. Jane blocked off search areas for small groups and required each group to stay in voice contact with one another. Savitri and Beata, who had become friends despite their interesting failure of a date, searched with me, Savitri keeping a tight grip on an old-style compass she had traded for with a Mennonite sometime before. Jane, some measure down the woods, was accompanied by Zoë and Hickory and Dickory. I wasn't entirely thrilled with Zoë being part of the search squad, but between Jane and the Obin she was probably safer in the woods than back home in Croatoan.

Three hours into the search, Hickory bounded up, shadowy in his nanomesh suit. "Lieutenant Sagan wishes to see you," it said.

"All right," I said, and motioned for Savitri and Beata to come along.

"No," Hickory said. "You only."

"What is it?" I asked.

"I cannot say," Hickory said. "Please, Major. You must come now."

"We're stuck in the creepy woods, then," Savitri said, to me.

"You can head in if you want," I said. "But tell the parties on either side so they can tighten up." And with that I jogged after Hickory, who kept an aggressive pace.

Several minutes later we arrived where Jane was. She was standing with Marta Piro and two other colonists, all three of whom had blank, numb expressions on their faces. Behind them was the massive carcass of a fantie, wild with tiny flying bugs, and a rather smaller carcass farther beyond that. Jane spied me and said something to Piro and the other two; they glanced over to me, nodded at whatever it was Jane was saying and then headed back toward the colony.

"Where's Zoë?" I asked.

"I had Dickory take her back," Jane said. "I didn't want her to see this. Marta and her team found something."

I motioned to the smaller carcass. "Joseph Loong, it looks like," I said.

"Not just that," Jane said. "Come here."

We walked over to Loong's corpse. It was a bloody mess. "Tell me what you see," Jane said.

I leaned down and got a good look, willing myself into a neutral frame of mind. "He's been eaten at," I said.

"That's what I told Marta and the others," Jane said. "And that's what I want them to believe for right now. *You* need to look closer."

I frowned and looked at the corpse again, trying to see what it was I was clearly missing. Suddenly it snapped into place.

I went cold. "Holy God," I said, and backed away from Loong.

Jane looked at me intently. "You see it, too," she said. "He wasn't eaten. He was *butchered*."

The Council crowded uncomfortably into the medical bay, along with Dr. Tsao. "This isn't going to be pleasant," I warned them, and pulled the sheet back on what was left of Joe Loong. Only Lee Chen and Marta Piro looked like they were likely to vomit, which was a better percentage than I expected.

"Christ. Something ate him," Paulo Gutierrez said.

"No," Hiram Yoder said. He moved closer to Loong. "Look," he said, pointing. "The tissues are cut, not torn. Here, here and here." He glanced over at Jane. "This is why you needed to show us this," he said. Jane nodded.

"Why?" Guiterrez said. "I don't understand. What are you showing us?"

"This man's been butchered," Yoder said. "Whoever did this to him used some sort of cutting tool to take off his flesh. A knife or an ax, possibly."

"How can you tell this?" Gutierrez said to Yoder.

"I've butchered enough animals to know what it looks like," Yoder said, and glanced up at Jane and I. "And I believe our administrators have seen enough of the violence of war to know what sort of violence this was."

"But you can't be sure," Marie Black said.

Jane glanced over to Dr. Tsao and nodded. "There are striations on the bone that are consistent with a cutting implement," Dr. Tsao said.

"They're precisely positioned. They don't look like what you'd see if a bone was gnawed on by an animal. Some*one* did this, not some*thing*."

"So you're saying there's a murderer in the colony," Manfred Trujillo said.

"Murderer?" Gutierrez said. "The hell with that. We've got a goddamn *cannibal* walking around."

"No," Jane said.

"Excuse me?" Gutierrez said. "You said it yourself, this man's been sliced up like he was livestock. One of us had to have done it."

Jane glanced over at me. "Okay," I said. "I'm going to have to do this formally. As the Colonial Union administrator of the colony of Roanoke, I hereby declare that everyone in this room is bound by the State Secrecy Act."

"I concur," Jane said.

"This means that nothing said or done here now can be shared outside this room to anyone, under penalty of treason," I said.

"The hell you say," Trujillo said.

"The hell I do say," I said. "No joke. You talk about any of this before Jane and I are ready for you to talk about it, and you'll be in deep shit."

"Define *deep shit*," Gutierrez said.

"I shoot you," Jane said. Gutierrez smiled uncertainly, waiting for Jane to indicate she was kidding. He kept waiting.

"All right," Trujillo said. "We understand. No talking."

"Thank you," I said. "We brought you over here for two reasons. The first was to show you him"—I pointed to Loong, whom Dr. Tsao had hidden again under the sheet—"and the second was to show you this." I reached over to the lab table, pulled an object from underneath a towel and handed it to Trujillo.

He examined it. "It looks like the head of a spear," he said.

"That's what it is," I said. "We found it by the fantie carcass near where we found Loong. We suspect it was thrown at the fantie and it managed to pull it out and break it, or perhaps broke it and then pulled it out."

Trujillo, who was in the act of handing the spearhead over to Lee Chen, stopped and took another look at it. "You're not seriously

suggesting what I think you're suggesting," he said.

"It wasn't just Loong who was butchered," Jane said. "The fantie was butchered, too. There were footprints around Loong, because of Marta and her search party and me and John. There were tracks around the fantie as well. They weren't ours."

"The fantie was brought down by some yotes," Marie Black said. "The yotes move in packs. It could happen."

"You're not listening," Jane said. "The fantie was *butchered*. Whoever butchered the fantie almost certainly butchered Loong. And whoever butchered the fantie wasn't human."

"You're saying there's some sort of aboriginal intelligent species here on Roanoke," Trujillo said.

"Yes," I said.

"How intelligent?" Trujillo asked.

"Intelligent enough to make that," I said, noting the spear. "It's a simple spear, but it's still a spear. And they're intelligent enough to make knives for butchering."

"We've been here almost a Roanoke year," Lee Chen said. "If these things exist, why haven't we seen them before?"

"I think we have," Jane said. "I think whatever these things are, were the ones who tried to get into Croatoan not long after we arrived. When they couldn't climb their way over the barrier they tried digging under."

"I thought the yotes did that," Chen said.

"We killed a yote in one of the holes," Jane said. "It doesn't mean the yote dug the hole."

"The holes happened right around the time we first saw the fanties," I said. "Now the fanties are back. Maybe these things follow the herd. No fanties, no Roanoke cavemen." I pointed to Loong. "I think these things were hunting a fantie. They killed it and were butchering it up when Loong wandered onto what they were doing. Maybe they killed him out of fear, and butchered him afterward."

"They saw him as prey," Gutierrez said.

"We don't know that," I said.

"Come on," Gutierrez said, waving toward Loong. "The sons of bitches turned him into fucking *steaks*."

"Yes," I said. "But we don't know if he was *hunted*. I'd rather we don't jump to any conclusions. And I'd rather *we* didn't start panicking about what these things are or what their intentions are toward us. As far as we know they have no intentions. This could have been a random encounter."

"You're not suggesting we pretend that Joe *wasn't* killed and eaten," said Marta Piro. "That's already impossible. Jun and Evan know, because they were with me when we found him. Jane's told us to keep quiet, and we have so far. But this isn't something you can keep quiet forever."

"We don't need to keep that part quiet," Jane said. "You can tell your people that part when you leave here. You need to keep quiet about the creatures that did this."

"I'm not going to pretend to my people that this was just some sort of random animal attack," Gutierrez said.

"No one's saying you should," I said. "Tell your people the truth: that there are predators following the fantie herd, they're dangerous and that until further notice no one goes for walks in the forest, or goes anywhere alone outside of Croatoan if they can help it. You don't have to tell them anything more than that for now."

"Why not?" Gutierrez said. "These things represent a real danger to us. They've already killed one of us. *Eaten* one of us. We need to get our people prepared."

"The reason why not is that people act irrationally if they think they're being hunted by something with a brain," Jane said. "Just like you're acting now."

Gutierrez glared at Jane. "I don't appreciate the suggestion that I'm acting irrationally," he said.

"Then don't act irrationally," Jane said, "because there will be consequences. Remember that you're under the State Secrecy Act, Gutierrez." Gutierrez subsided, clearly not satisfied.

"Look," I said. "If these things *are* intelligent, then among other things I think we have some responsibilities to them, primarily *not* wiping them out over what might have been a misunderstanding. And if they are intelligent, then maybe we can find a way to let them know they'd be best off avoiding *us*." I motioned for the spearhead; Trujillo

handed it over. "They're using *these*, for Christ's sake"—waving the spear—"even with the dumb guns we have to use here, we could probably wipe them out a hundred times over. But I'd like to try *not* doing that if we can manage it."

"Let me try to put it a different way," Trujillo said to Hiram Yoder. "You're asking us to withhold critical information from our people. I—and I think Paulo here as well—worry that holding back that information makes our people less safe, because our people don't know the full scope of what they're dealing with. Look where we are *now*. We're all stuffed into a cargo container wrapped in cloaking fabric to keep us hidden, and that's because our government withheld critical information from us. The Colonial government played *us* for fools, and that's why we live like we do now. No offense."

"None taken," Yoder said.

"My point is, our government screwed *us* with secrets," Trujillo said. "Why would we want to do the same to *our* people?"

"I don't want to keep this a secret forever," I said. "But right now we lack information on whether these people are a genuine threat, and I'd like to be able to get it without people going a little crazy out of fear of Roanoke Neanderthals wandering in the brush."

"You're assuming people will go a little crazy," Trujillo said.

"I'd be happy to be proven wrong," I said. "But for now let's err on the side of caution."

"Inasmuch as we don't have a choice in the matter, let's err indeed," Trujillo said.

"Christ," Jane said. I noted an unusual tone in her voice: exasperation. "Trujillo, Gutierrez, use your goddamn heads. *We didn't have to tell you any of this*. Marta didn't know what she was looking at when she found Loong; the only one of you who saw it for himself was Yoder, and only because he saw it here. If we hadn't told you everything right now, you'd never have known. I could have cleaned this all up and not one of you would be the wiser. But we didn't want that; we knew we had to tell all of you. We've trusted you enough to share something we didn't have to share. Trust us that we need time before you tell the colonists. It's not too much to ask."

"Everything I'm telling you is protected by the State Secrecy Act," I said.

"We have a state?" Jerry Bennett asked.

"Jerry," I said.

"Sorry," Jerry said. "What's up?"

I told Jerry about the creatures and an update about the Council meeting the night before. "That's pretty wild," Jerry said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Go through the files we were given about this planet," I said. "Tell me if you see anything there that gives any indication that the Colonial Union knew anything about these guys. I mean *anything*."

"There's nothing on them directly," Bennett said. "I know that much. I read the files as I was printing them out for you."

"I'm not looking for direct references. I mean anything in the files that suggests these guys were here," I said.

"You think the CU edited out the fact this planet has an intelligent species on it?" Bennett asked. "Why would they do that?"

"I don't know," I said. "It wouldn't make any sense. But sending us to a whole different planet than the one we were supposed to be on and then cutting us off entirely doesn't make any sense either, does it?"

"Brother, you have a point there," Bennett said, and thought for a moment. "How deep do you want me to go?" he asked.

"As deep as you can," I said. "Why?"

Bennett grabbed a PDA from his bench and pulled up a file. "The Colonial Union uses a standard file format for all its documents," he said. "Text, images, audio, they all get poured into the same sort of file. One of the things you can do with the file format is get it to track editing changes. You write a draft of something, you send it to the boss, she makes changes, and the document comes back to you and you can see where and how your boss made the changes. It tracks however many changes get made—stores the deleted material in metadata. You don't see it unless you turn on version tracking."

"So any edits that were made would still be in the document," I said.

"They might be," Bennett said. "It's a CU rule that final documents are supposed to have this sort of metadata stripped out. But it's one

thing to mandate it, and another thing to get people to remember to do it."

"Do it, then," I said. "I want everything looked at. Sorry about becoming a pain in your ass."

"Nah," Bennett said. "Batch commands make life easy. After that it's a matter of the right search parameters. This is what I do."

"I owe you one, Jerry," I said.

"Yeah?" Bennett said. "If you mean it you'll get me an assistant. Being the tech guy for an entire colony is a lot of work. And I spend my entire day in a box. It'd be nice to have some company."

"I'll get on it," I said. "You get on this."

"On it," Bennett said, and waved me out of the Box.

Jane and Hiram Yoder were walking up as I came outside. "We have a problem," Jane said. "A big one."

"What?" I said.

Jane nodded to Hiram. "Paulo Gutierrez and four other men came past my farm today," Hiram said. "Carrying rifles and heading toward the woods. I asked him what he was doing and he said that he and his friends were going on a hunting trip. I asked them what he was hunting for and he said that I should know full well what they were planning to hunt. He asked me if I wanted to come along. I told him that my religion forbade the taking of intelligent life, and I asked him to reconsider what he was doing, because he was going against your wishes, and planning to murder another creature. He laughed and walked off toward the tree line. They're out in the woods now, Administrator Perry. I think they mean to kill as many of the creatures as they can find."

Yoder walked us to where he saw the men enter the woods and told us he'd wait for us there. Jane and I went in and started looking for the trail of men.

"Here," Jane said, pointing to boot marks on the forest floor. Paulo and his boys were making no attempt to keep themselves hidden, or if they were, they were very bad at it. "Idiots," Jane said, and took off

after them, unthinkingly moving at her new and improved high speed. I ran off after her, neither as fast nor as quietly.

I caught up with her about a klick later. "Don't do that again," I said. "I'm about to heave my lungs out."

"Quiet," Jane said. I shut up. Jane's hearing had no doubt improved with her speed. I tried to suck oxygen into my lungs as quietly as I could. She began walking west when we heard a shot, followed by three more. Jane began running again, in the direction of the shots. I followed as quickly as I could.

Another klick later I entered a clearing. Jane was kneeling over a body that had blood pooling underneath it; another man sat nearby, propped up by the woody stump of a bush. I ran over to Jane and the body, whose front was spattered with blood. She barely glanced up. "Dead already," she said. "Shot between the rib and the sternum. Right through the heart, straight out the back. Probably dead before he hit the ground."

I looked up at the man's face. It took me a minute to recognize him: Marco Flores, one of Gutierrez's colonists from Khartoum. I left Flores to Jane and went over to the other man, who was staring blankly ahead. It was another Khartoum colonist, Galen DeLeon.

"Galen," I said, crouching down to get at his eye level. The salutation didn't register. I snapped my fingers a couple of times to get his attention. "Galen," I said again. "Tell me what happened."

"I shot Marco," DeLeon said, in a bland, conversational voice. He was looking past me, at nothing in particular. "I didn't mean to. They just came out of nowhere, and I shot one, and Marco got in the way. I shot him. He went down." DeLeon put his hands on his forehead and started grasping at his hair. "I didn't mean to," he said. "All of a sudden they were just there."

"Galen," I said. "You came out here with Paulo Gutierrez and a couple other men. Where did they go?"

DeLeon waved indistinctly in a westerly direction. "They ran off. Paulo and Juan and Deit went after them. I stayed. To see if I could help Marco. To see . . ." he trailed off again. I stood up.

"I didn't mean to shoot him," DeLeon said, still in that bland tone. "They were just there. And they moved so fast. You should have seen

them. If you saw them, you know why I had to shoot. If you saw what they looked like."

"What do they look like?" I asked.

DeLeon smiled tragically and for the first time looked at me. "Like werewolves." He closed his eyes and put his head back in his hands.

I went back over to Jane. "DeLeon's in shock," I said. "One of us should take him back."

"What did he say happened?" Jane asked.

"Said the things came out of nowhere and ran that way," I said, pointing west. "Gutierrez and the rest of them went chasing after them." It hit me. "They're running into an ambush," I said.

"Come on," Jane said, and pointed to Flores's rifle. "Take that," she said, and ran. I took Flores's rifle, checked the load and once again started after my wife.

There was another rifle shot, followed by the sound of men yelling. I put on a burst of speed and came up a rise to find Jane in a broken grove of Roanoke trees, kneeling on the back of one of the men, who was yelling in pain. Paulo Gutierrez was pointing his rifle at Jane and ordering her off the man. Jane wasn't budging. A third man stood to the side, looking like he was about to wet his pants.

I leveled my rifle at Gutierrez. "Drop your rifle, Paulo," I said. "Drop it or I'm going to drop you."

"Tell your wife to get off Deit," Gutierrez said.

"No," I said. "Now drop your weapon."

"She's breaking his goddamn arm!" Gutierrez said.

"If she wanted to break his arm, it'd be broken by now," I said. "And if she wanted to kill every one of you, you'd already be dead. Paulo, I'm not going to tell you again. Drop your rifle."

Paulo dropped his rifle. I glanced over at the third man, who would be Juan. He dropped his, too. "Down," I said to the both of them. "Knees and palms on the ground." They went down.

"Jane," I said.

"This one took a shot at me," Jane said.

"I didn't know it was you!" Diet said.

"Shut up," Jane said. He shut up.

I walked over to Juan and Gutierrez's rifles and picked them up. "Paulo, where are your other men?" I asked.

"They're behind us somewhere," Gutierrez said. "These things popped out of nowhere and started running this way, and we came after them. Marco and Galen probably went off in another direction."

"Marco is dead," I said.

"Those fuckers got him," Deit said.

"No," I said. "Galen shot him. Just like you almost shot her."

"Holy Christ," Gutierrez said. "Marco."

"This is *exactly* why I wanted to keep this quiet," I said to Gutierrez. "To keep some idiot from doing this. You dumbfucks haven't got the first clue what you're doing, and now one of you is dead, one of you killed him, and the rest of you are running into an ambush."

"Oh God," Gutierrez said. He tried to sit up from his four-on-the-floor position but lost his balance, and collapsed in a pile of grief.

"We're going to walk out of here now, all of us," I said, walking over to Gutierrez. "We're going to go back the way we came in, and along the way we're going to pick up Galen and Marco. Paulo, I'm sorry—" I caught movement out of the corner of my eye; it was Jane, telling me to cut it off. She was listening for something. I looked over at her. *What is it?* I mouthed.

Jane looked down at Deit. "What direction did those things you were chasing run off in?"

Deit pointed west. "That way. We were chasing them, and then they disappeared, and then you came running up."

"What do you mean they disappeared?" Jane said.

"One minute we saw them and the next we didn't," Deit said. "Those fuckers are fast."

Jane got off Deit. "Get up. Now," she said. She looked over to me. "They weren't running into an ambush. This *is* the ambush."

Then I heard what Jane had been hearing: a soft mass of clicks, coming from the trees. Coming from directly above us.

"Oh, shit," I said.

"What the hell is that?" Gutierrez said, and looked up as the spear came down, exposing his neck to its tip, which slid into that soft space

at the top of the sternum and drove itself into his viscera. I rolled, avoiding a spear of my own, and looked up as I did.

It was raining werewolves.

Two fell near me and Gutierrez, who was still alive, trying to pull out the spear. One grabbed the spear near the end and drove it down farther into Gutierrez's chest and shook it violently. Gutierrez spat up blood and died. The second slashed at me with claws as I rolled, ripping my jacket but missing flesh. I had kept my rifle and drew it up with one hand; the thing grabbed the barrel with both of its paws or claws or hands and prepared to pull it out of my grip. It didn't seem to know that a projectile could come out of the end; I educated it on the subject. The creature brutalizing Gutierrez uttered a sharp click of what I hoped was terror and sprinted east, getting a running start at a tree, which it scaled and then hurled itself from, landing on another tree. It disappeared into the foliage.

I looked around. They were gone. They were *all* gone.

Something moved; I trained the rifle on it. It was Jane. She was pulling a knife out of one of the werewolves. Another werewolf lay nearby. I looked for Juan and Deit and found them on the ground, lifeless.

"Okay?" Jane said to me. I nodded. Jane stood, holding her side; blood slipped between her fingers.

"You're hurt," I said.

"I'm fine," she said. "It looks worse than it is."

In the distance there was a very human scream.

"DeLeon," Jane said, and started running, still holding her side. I gave chase.

Most of DeLeon was missing. Some of him was left behind. Wherever the rest of him was, it was still alive and screaming. A blood trail went from where he had sat to one of the trees. There was another scream.

"They're taking him north," I said. "Come on."

"No," Jane said, and pointed. In the east, there was movement in the trees. "They're using DeLeon as bait to lead us away. Most of them are headed east. Back toward the colony."

"We can't leave DeLeon," I said. "He's still alive."

"I'll get him," Jane said. "You get back. Be careful. Watch the trees and the ground." She was off.

Fifteen minutes later I breached the border of the woods and came back to colony ground to find four werewolves in a semicircle and Hiram Yoder standing silently at their focus. I dropped to the ground.

The werewolves didn't notice me; they were entirely intent on Yoder, who continued to stand stock-still. Two of the werewolves had spears trained on him, ready to run him through if he moved. He didn't. All four of them clicked and hissed, the hisses falling in and out of my sonic range; this was why Jane heard them before the rest of us did.

One of the werewolves came forward to Yoder, hissing and clicking at him, stocky and muscular where Yoder was tall and trim. It had a simple stone knife in one hand. It reached out a claw and poked Yoder hard in the chest; Yoder took it and stood there, silently. The thing grabbed his right arm and began to sniff it and examine it; Yoder offered no resistance. Yoder was a Mennonite, a pacifist.

The werewolf suddenly struck Yoder hard on the arm, perhaps testing him. Yoder staggered a bit from the blow but stood his ground. The werewolf let out a rapid series of chirps and then the others did, too; I suspected they were laughing.

The werewolf raked his claws across Yoder's face, shredding the man's right cheek with an audible scraping sound. Blood poured down Yoder's face; he involuntarily clutched it with his hand. The werewolf cooed and stared at Yoder, its four eyes unblinking, waiting to see what he would do.

Yoder dropped his hand from his ruined face and looked directly at the werewolf. He slowly turned his head to offer his other cheek.

The werewolf stepped away from Yoder and back toward its own, chirping. The two who had spears trained on Yoder let them drop slightly. I breathed a sigh of relief and looked down for a second, registering my own cold sweat. Yoder had kept himself alive by not offering resistance; the creatures, whatever else they were, were smart enough to see that he was not a threat.

I raised my head again to see one of the werewolves staring directly at me.

It let out a trilling cry. The werewolf closest to Yoder glanced over at me, snarled and drove his stone knife into Yoder. Yoder stiffened. I raised my rifle and shot the werewolf in the head. It fell; the other werewolves bolted back into the woods.

I ran over to Yoder, who had collapsed on the ground, and was pawing gingerly at the stone knife. "Don't touch it," I said. If the knife had nicked any major blood vessels, pulling it out could cause him to bleed out.

"It hurts," Yoder said. He looked up at me and smiled, gritting his teeth. "Well, it almost worked."

"It did work," I said. "I'm sorry, Hiram. This wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for me."

"Not your fault," Hiram said. "I saw you drop and hide. Saw you give me a chance. You did the right thing." He reached out toward the corpse of the werewolf, touching the sprawled leg. "Wish you didn't have to shoot it," he said.

"I'm sorry," I said again. Hiram didn't have anything more to say.

"Hiram Yoder. Paulo Gutierrez. Juan Escobedo. Marco Flores. Deiter Gruber. Galen DeLeon," Manfred Trujillo said. "Six dead."

"Yes," I said. I sat at my kitchen table. Zoë was at Trujillo's, spending the night with Gretchen. Hickory and Dickory were with her. Jane was in the medical bay; on top of the gash in her side she had scraped herself up pretty badly chasing DeLeon. Babar was resting his head in my lap. I was patting it absentmindedly.

"One body," Trujillo said. I looked up at that. "A hundred of us went into those woods, where you told us to go. We found blood, but not a single one of their bodies. Those things took them with them."

"What about Galen?" I said. Jane had told me that she'd found parts of him, leaving a trail as she went along. She stopped following after he stopped screaming, and when her own injuries kept her from going farther.

"We found a few things," Trujillo said. "Not enough to consider a body."

"Great," I said. "Just great."

"How do you feel?" Trujillo asked.

"Jesus, Man," I said. "How do you think I feel? We lost six people today. We lost godda—we lost Hiram Yoder. We would all be dead if it wasn't for him. He *saved* this colony, him and the Mennonites. Now he's dead, and it's my fault."

"It was Paulo who put that posse together," Trujillo said. "He went against your orders and he got five others killed. And put you and Jane in danger. If someone's going to shoulder the blame, it should be him."

"I'm not looking to blame Paulo," I said.

"I know you're not," Trujillo said. "That's why I'm saying it. Paulo was a friend of mine, as good a friend as I have here. But he did something foolish, and he got those men killed. He should have listened to you."

"Yes. Well," I said. "I thought making these creatures a state secret would *keep* something like this from happening. That's why I did it."

"Secrets have a way of getting out," Trujillo said. "You know that. Or should."

"I should have let everyone know about these things," I said.

"Maybe," Trujillo said. "You had to make a call here and you made it. It wasn't the one I would have thought you would make, I have to say. It wasn't like you. If you don't mind me saying so, you're not that good with secrets. People here aren't used to you having them, either."

I grunted assent and patted my dog. Trujillo shifted uncomfortably in his chair for a few minutes. "What are you going to do now?" he asked.

"Fuck if I know," I said. "Right now what I'd really like to do is put a fist through my wall."

"I'd advise against that," Trujillo said. "I know you don't like taking my advice on general principle. Nevertheless, there it is."

I smiled at that one. I nodded toward the door. "How are people?"

"They're scared as hell," Trujillo said. "One man died yesterday, six more died today, five of *them* disappeared, and people are worried they'll be next. I suspect most people will be sleeping inside the village for the next couple of nights. I'm afraid the cat is out of the bag about these creatures being intelligent, by the way. Gutierrez told a whole lot of people while he was trying to recruit for his posse."

"I'm surprised another group hasn't gone out looking for the werewolves," I said.

"You're calling them werewolves?" Trujillo said.

"You saw the one that killed Hiram," I said. "Tell me that's not what it looks like."

"Do me a favor and don't share that name," Trujillo said. "People are scared enough."

"Fine," I said.

"And yes, there was another group who wanted to go out and try to get revenge. A bunch of idiot kids. Your daughter's boyfriend Enzo was one of them."

"Ex-boyfriend," I said. "Did you talk them out of doing something stupid?"

"I pointed out that five grown men went out hunting for them and not a single one of them came home," Trujillo said. "That seemed to calm them down a bit."

"Good," I said.

"You need to make an appearance tonight, down at the community hall," Trujillo said. "People will be there. They need to see you."

"I'm not in any shape to see people," I said.

"You don't have a choice," Trujillo said. "You're the colony leader. People are in mourning, John. You and your wife are the only ones that came out of this alive, and she's in the medical bay. If you spend the entire night hiding in here, it says to everyone out there that no one gets away from these things alive. And you kept a secret from them. You need to start making up for that."

"I didn't know you were a psychologist, Man," I said.

"I'm not," he said. "I'm a politician. And so are you, whether you want to admit to it or not. This is the job of a colony leader."

"I tell you truly, Man," I said. "If you asked for the job of colony leader, I would give it to you. Right now, I would. I know you think you *should* have been colony leader. So. The job is yours. Want it?"

Trujillo paused to consider his words. "You're right," he said. "I thought I should have been the colony leader. Occasionally I still do. And someday, I think I probably will be. But right now, it's *not* my job. It's yours. My job is to be your loyal opposition. And what your loyal

opposition thinks is this: Your people are scared, John. You're their leader. Do some goddamn leading. Sir."

"That's the first time you've ever called me *sir*," I said, after a long minute.

Trujillo grinned. "I was saving it for a special moment," he said.

"Well, then," I said. "Well done. Well done, indeed."

Trujillo stood up. "I'll see you around this evening, then," he said.

"You will," I said. "I'll try to be reassuring. Thanks, Man." He waved off the thanks and left as someone else came walking up to my porch. It was Jerry Bennett.

I waved him in. "What do you have for me?" I asked.

"On the creatures, nothing," Bennett said. "I did all sorts of search parameters and came out with squat. There's not a lot to go on. They didn't do a whole lot on exploring on this planet."

"Tell me something I don't know," I said.

"All right," Bennett said. "You know that video file of the Conclave blasting that colony?"

"Yes," I said. "What does that have to do with this planet?"

"It doesn't," Bennett said. "I told you, I checked all the data files for edits under a batch command. It scooped up that file with all the rest of them."

"What about the file?" I asked.

"Well, it turns out the video file you have is only part of another video file. The metadata features time codes for the original video file. The time codes say your video is just the tail end of that other video. There's more video there."

"How much more?" I asked.

"A *lot* more," Bennett said.

"Can you get it back?" I asked

Bennett smiled. "Already done," he said.

Six hours and a few dozen strained conversations with colonists later, I let myself into the Black Box. The PDA Bennett had loaded the video file into was on his desk, as promised. I picked it up; the video was already queued up and paused at the start. Its first image was of two

creatures on a hill, overlooking a river. I recognized the hill and one of the creatures from the video I'd already seen. The other one I hadn't seen before. I squinted to get a better look, then cursed myself for being stupid and magnified the image. The other creature resolved itself.

It was a Whaid.

"Hello," I said to the creature. "What are you doing, talking to the guy who wiped out your colony?"

I started the video to find out.

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EIGHT

The two stood near the edge of a bluff overlooking a river, watching the sunset over the far prairie.

"You have beautiful sunsets here," General Tarsem Gau said to Chan orenThen.

"Thank you," orenThen said. "It's the volcanoes."

Gau looked over at orenThen, amused. The rolling plain was interrupted only by the river, its bluffs and the small colony that lay where the bluffs descended toward the water.

"Not *here*," orenThen said, sensing Gau's unspoken observation. He pointed west, where the sun had just sunk below the horizon. "Half a planet that way. Lots of tectonic activity. There's a ring of volcanoes around the entire western ocean. One of them went up just as autumn ended. There's still dust in the atmosphere."

"Must have made for a hard winter," Gau said.

OrenThen made a motion that suggested otherwise. "Big enough eruption for nice sunsets. Not big enough for climate change. We have mild winters. It's one of the reasons we settled here. Hot summers, but good for growing. Rich soil. Excellent water supply."

"And no volcanoes," Gau said.

"No volcanoes," orenThen agreed. "No quakes, either, because we're right in the middle of a tectonic plate. Incredible thunderstorms, however. And last summer, tornadoes with hail the size of your head. We lost crops with that. But no place is entirely perfect. On balance this

is a good place to start a colony, and to build a new world for my people."

"I agree," Gau said. "And from what I can tell, you've done a marvelous job leading this colony."

OrenThen bowed his head slightly. "Thank you, General. Coming from you, that's high praise indeed."

The two returned their attention to the sunset, watching as the early dusk deepened around them.

"Chan," Gau said. "You know I can't let you keep this colony."

"Aah," orenThen said, and smiled, still looking into the sunset. "So much for this being a social call."

"You know it's not," Gau said.

"I know," orenThen said. "Your knocking my communications satellite out of the sky was my first clue." OrenThen pointed down the slope of the bluff, where a platoon of Gau's soldiers stood, warily eyed by orenThen's own escort of farmers. "They were my second."

"They're for show," Gau said. "I needed to be able to talk to you without the distraction of being shot at."

"And blasting my satellite?" orenThen said. "That's not for show, I suspect."

"It was necessary, for your sake," Gau said.

"I doubt that," orenThen said.

"If I left you your satellite, you or someone in your colony would have sent a skip drone, letting your government know you were under attack," Gau said. "But that's not why I'm here."

"You just told me that I can't keep this colony," orenThen said.

"You can't," Gau said. "But that's not the same thing as being under attack."

"The distinction escapes me, General," orenThen said. "Particularly with a very expensive satellite blown to bits by your guns, and your soldiers on my soil."

"How long have we known each other, Chan?" Gau said. "We've known each other a long time, as friends and adversaries. You've seen how I do things, up close. Have you ever known me to say one thing and mean another?"

OrenThen was quiet for a moment. "No," he said, finally. "You can be an arrogant ass, Tarsem. But you've always said what you meant to say."

"Then trust me once more," Gau said. "More than anything, I want this to end peacefully. It's why I am here, and not anyone else. Because what you and I do here matters, beyond the planet and this colony. I can't let your colony remain here. You know that. But that doesn't mean you or any of your people have to suffer for it."

There was another moment of silence from orenThen. "I have to admit I was surprised that it was you on that ship," he eventually said to Gau. "We knew there was the risk that the Conclave would come for us. You didn't spend all that time wrestling all those races into line and declaring an end to colonization just to let us slip through the cracks. We planned for this possibility. But I assumed it would be some ship with a junior officer at the helm. Instead we get the leader of the Conclave."

"We are friends," Gau said. "You deserve the courtesy."

"You are kind to say so, General," orenThen said. "But, friend or not, it's overkill."

Gau smiled. "Well, possibly. Or, perhaps it's more accurate to say it *would* be overkill. But your colony is more important than you think, Chan."

"I don't see how," orenThen said. "I like it. There are good people here. But we're a seed colony. There are hardly two thousand of us. We're at subsistence level. All we do is grow food for ourselves and prepare for the next wave of settlers. And all they will do is prepare for the wave of settlers after them. There's nothing important about that."

"Now it's you who is being disingenuous," Gau said. "You know very well that it's not what your colony grows or makes that makes it important. It's the simple fact it exists, in violation of the Conclave Agreement. There are to be new colonies that are not administered through the Conclave. The fact your people ignored the agreement is an explicit challenge to the legitimacy of the Conclave."

"We didn't *ignore* it," orenThen said, irritation creeping into his voice. "It simply doesn't apply to us. We didn't sign the Conclave Agreement, General. We didn't, nor did a couple hundred other races.

We're free to colonize as we will. And that's what we did. You have no right to question that, General. We are a sovereign people."

"You're going formal on me," Gau said. "I remember that being a sure sign that I've pissed you off."

"Don't assume too much familiarity, General," orenThen said. "We have been friends, yes. Perhaps we still are. But you shouldn't doubt where my loyalties lie. Don't think that just because you've ensnared the majority of races into your Conclave that you have some great moral authority. Before the Conclave, if you were to attack my colony, it would be a land grab, pure and simple. Now that you have your precious Conclave, it's still a land grab, pure and simple."

"I remember when you thought the Conclave was a good idea," Gau said. "I remember you arguing for it to the other Whaid diplomats. I remember you convincing them, and them convincing your ataFuey to have the Whaid join the Conclave."

"The ataFuey was assassinated," orenThen said. "You know that. His son was of an entirely different mind."

"Yes he was," Gau said. "Oddly convenient for him that his father was assassinated when he was."

"I can't speak to that," orenThen said. "And after the new ataFuey took the throne it was not my place to go against his will."

"The ataFuey's son was a fool, and you know that," Gau said.

"That may be," orenThen said. "But as I said, you should not doubt where my loyalties lie."

"I don't doubt where they lie," Gau said. "I never have. They lie with the Whaidi people. That's why you fought for the Conclave. If the Whaid had joined the Conclave, you could have colonized this planet, and more than four hundred other races backing your right to be here."

"We *do* have a right to be here," orenThen said. "And we do have the planet."

"You're going to lose it," Gau said.

"And we never would have had this planet under the Conclave," orenThen said, plowing through Gau's words. "Because it would be Conclave territory, not Whaidi. We would merely be sharecroppers, sharing the planet with other Conclave races. That's still part of the Conclave mind-set, isn't it? Multiple races on single worlds? Build a

planetary identity that's not based on species but on allegiance to the Conclave, to create a lasting peace. Or so you believe."

"You used to think that was a good idea, too," Gau said.

"Life surprises," orenThen said. "Things change."

"Indeed they do," Gau said. "You remember what set me on the path to the Conclave."

"The Battle of Amin, or so you like to say," orenThen said. "When you took back the planet from the Kies."

"Entirely unnecessarily," Gau said. "They're water dwellers. There was no rational reason we couldn't have shared the planet. But *we* wouldn't. *They* wouldn't. And both of us lost more than we could have won. Before that battle, I was as xenophobic as your damned ataFuey, and as much as you're pretending to be now. After it, I was ashamed how we poisoned that planet when we took it back. *Ashamed*, Chan. And I knew that it would never end. Unless I made it end. Unless I made things change."

"And here you are with your great Conclave, your so-called hope for peace in this part of space," orenThen said, mockingly. "And what you're doing with it is trying to pry me and my colony off this planet. You *haven't* made it end, General. You haven't made things change."

"No, I haven't," Gau admitted. "Not yet. But I'm getting closer."

"I'm still waiting to hear how any of this makes my colony so important," orenThen said.

"The Conclave Agreement says that those races who are members of the Conclave may not hold new worlds for themselves; they colonize the worlds they discover but other Conclave members will colonize, too," Gau said. "The agreement also says that when the Conclave finds a planet colonized by a non-Conclave species after the Agreement, it takes that planet for the Conclave. No one gets to colonize unless it's through the Conclave. We warned non-Conclave species about this."

"I remember," orenThen said. "I was chosen to lead this colony not long after you said this."

"And yet you colonized," Gau said.

"The Conclave was not a sure thing, General," orenThen said. "Despite your sense of destiny, you still could have failed."

"Fair enough," Gau said. "But I didn't fail. Now the Conclave exists, and now we have to enforce the Agreement. Several dozen colonies founded after the Agreement was created. Including this one."

"Now I see," orenThen said. "We're the first in a series of conquests for the glory of the Conclave."

"No," Gau said. "Not conquests. I keep telling you this. I'm hoping for something else entirely."

"And what would that be?" orenThen asked.

"For you to leave on your own," Gau said.

OrenThen stared at Gau. "Old friend, you have entirely lost your mind," he said.

"Listen, Chan," Gau said, urgently. "There is a reason it starts here. I *know* you. I know where your loyalties lie—with your people, not with your ataFuey and his policy of racial suicide. The Conclave will *not* allow the Whaid to colonize. It's as simple as that. You will be held to the planets you had before the Agreement. No more. And from those few planets, you will see the rest of space fill up without you. You will be *isolated*—no trade and no travel to any other worlds. You will be contained, my friend. And contained, you will wither and die. You know the Conclave can do this. You know *I* can do this."

OrenThen said nothing. Gau continued. "I can't make the ataFuey change his mind. But you can help me show others that the Conclave would rather work through peace. Give up your colony. Convince your colonists to leave. You can return to your home world. I promise safe passage."

"You know that's an empty offer," orenThen said. "If we abandon this colony we'll be branded as traitors. All of us."

"Then join the Conclave, Chan," Gau said. "Not the Whaid. *You*. You and your colonists. The Conclave's first colony world is about to open to emigrants. Your colonists can be among them. You can still be the first to a new world. You can still be colonists."

"And you would get the public relations coup of not massacring a colony's worth of people," orenThen said.

"Yes," Gau said. "Of course. That's part of it. It will be easier to convince other colonies to leave their worlds if they can see that I spared you on this one. Avoiding bloodshed here can help us avoid

bloodshed other places. You'll save more lives than those of your colonists."

"That's part of it, you said," orenThen said. "What's the other part?"

"I don't want you to die," Gau said.

"You mean you don't want to kill me," orenThen said.

"That's right," Gau said.

"But you *will*," orenThen pressed. "Me and every one of my colonists."

"Yes," Gau said.

OrenThen snorted. "Sometimes I really wish you didn't always mean what you say."

"I can't help it," Gau said.

"You never could," orenThen said. "It's part of what passes for your charm."

Gau said nothing, and looked toward the stars, which were beginning to show in the darkening sky. OrenThen followed his gaze. "Looking for your ship?"

"Found it," Gau said, and pointed upward. "The *Gentle Star*. You remember it."

"I do," orenThen said. "It was small and old back when I first met you. I'm surprised you still command from it."

"One of the nice things about running the universe is that you're allowed your affectations," Gau said.

OrenThen motioned back toward Gau's platoon. "If memory serves, you've got about enough space on the *Gentle* for a small company of soldiers. I don't doubt that's enough to do the job here. But if you're determined to make a statement, it seems underwhelming."

"First it's overkill, and now it's underwhelming," Gau said.

"*Your* being here is overkill," orenThen said. "It's your soldiers we're talking about now."

"I was hoping not to use any of them," Gau said. "And that you would listen to reason. That being the case, there wouldn't be a need to bring any more."

"And if I don't listen to 'reason'?" orenThen said. "You could take this colony with a company, General. But we can make you pay for it. Some of my people were soldiers. All of them are tough. Some of your soldiers would be buried with us."

"I know," Gau said. "But it was never my plan to use my soldiers. If you won't listen to reason—or the pleadings of an old friend—I have another plan in mind."

"Which is?" orenThen asked.

"I'll show you," Gau said, and looked back toward his platoon. One of the soldiers came forward; Gau nodded to him. The soldier saluted and began speaking into a communications device. Gau returned his attention to orenThen.

"Since you once lobbied your own government to join the Conclave—and failed, through no fault of your own—I'm sure you can appreciate it when I tell you that it's nothing short of miraculous that the Conclave exists at all," Gau said. "There are four hundred and twelve races within the Conclave, each of them with their own plans and agendas, all of which had to be taken into consideration as the Conclave came into being. Even now the Conclave is a fragile thing. There are factions and alliances. Some races joined the Conclave thinking they could bide their time before taking it over. Others joined thinking the Conclave would be a free ride to colonization, with nothing else expected from them. I've had to make them *all* understand that the Conclave means security for all of them, and expects responsibility from all of them. And those races who didn't join the Conclave have to learn that what the Conclave does—all of its members do."

"So you're here in the name of all the Conclave races," orenThen said.

"That's not what I mean," Gau said.

"You've lost me again, General," orenThen said.

"Look," Gau said, and pointed toward his ship again. "You can see the *Gentle*?"

"Yes," orenThen said.

"Tell me what else you see," Gau said.

“I see stars,” orenThen said. “What else am I supposed to be seeing?”

“Keep watching,” Gau said.

A moment later a point of light appeared in the sky, near the *Gentle*. Then another, and another.

“More ships,” orenThen said.

“Yes,” Gau said.

“How many?” orenThen asked.

“Keep watching,” Gau said.

The ships winked in, singly, then in pairs and triplets, then in constellations.

“So many,” orenThen said, after some time.

“Keep watching,” Gau said.

OrenThen waited until he was sure no more ships were coming before he turned again to look at Gau, who was still looking into the sky.

“There are four hundred and twelve ships in your sky,” Gau said. “One ship from every member race of the Conclave. This is the fleet with which we will visit every world that was colonized, without authorization, after the Agreement.” Gau turned again and looked for his lieutenant, whom he could barely see in the gloom. Gau gave his lieutenant a second nod. The soldier spoke in his communicator again.

From each ship in the sky, a beam of coherent light stabbed into the colony on the riverbank, blanketing the colony in white. OrenThen let out an agonized, bursting cry.

“Spotlights, Chan,” Gau said. “Only spotlights.”

It took a few moments before orenThen could respond. “Spotlights,” he said, finally. “But only for the moment, correct?”

“At my order, every ship in the fleet will refocus its beam,” Gau said. “Your colony will be destroyed, and every member race of the Conclave will have a hand in it. This is how it has to be done. Security for all, responsibility from all. And no race can say it did not agree to the cost.”

“I wish I’d killed you when I first saw you here,” orenThen said. “Us standing here talking about sunsets when you had this waiting for me. You and your damned Conclave.”

Gau spread his arms, opening himself. "Kill me, Chan. It won't save this colony. It won't stop the Conclave, either. Nothing you can do will stop the Conclave from taking this planet, or the next, or the next. The Conclave is four hundred peoples. Every race who fights against it fights alone. The Whaid. The Rraey. The Fran. The Humans. All of the others who have started colonies since the Agreement. If nothing else, it's a matter of numbers. We have more. One race against one other race is one thing. One race against four hundred is quite another. All it will take is time."

OrenThen turned away from Gau and toward his colony, bathed in light. "I'll tell you something," orenThen said to Gau. "You might find it ironic. When I was chosen to lead this colony, I warned the ataFuey that you would come for it. You and the entire Conclave. He told me that the Conclave would never form and that you were a fool for trying, and that I had been a fool for ever listening to you. There were too many races ever to agree to anything, much less a grand alliance. And that the enemies of the Conclave were working too hard to fail. He said the Humans would stop you if no one else did. He thought highly of their ability to set everyone against each other without getting involved themselves."

"He wasn't far wrong," Gau said. "But the Humans overreached. They always do. The opposition they created to counter the Conclave fell apart. Most of *those* races are now more concerned about the Humans than they are about us. By the time the Conclave gets to the Humans, there may not be many of them left."

"You could have gone after the Humans first," orenThen said.

"In time," Gau said.

"Let me put it another way," orenThen said. "You didn't have to come *here* first."

"*You* were here," Gau said. "You have a history with the Conclave. You have a history with me. Anywhere else and there would be no question that this would begin with destruction. Here you and I have a chance for something else. Something that will matter beyond this moment and this colony."

"You've put a lot on me," orenThen said. "And on my people."

"I have," Gau said. "I'm sorry, old friend. I couldn't see any other way. I saw a chance to show people that the Conclave wants peace, and I had to take it. It's a lot to ask of you. But I *am* asking you, Chan. Help me. Help me save your people, not destroy them. Help me build peace in our part of space. I beg this of you."

"You beg me?" orenThen said, his voice rising. He advanced on Gau. "You have *four hundred and twelve* battleships pointing their weapons at my colony and you beg me to help you build *peace*? Fah. Your words mean nothing, *old friend*. You come here, peddling that friendship, and in return for it ask me to exchange my colony, my loyalty, my identity. Everything I have. At the end of a gun. To help you provide the *illusion* of peace. The *illusion* that what you do here is something other than simple, raw conquest. You dangle the lives of my colonists in front of me, and tell me to choose between making them traitors or killing them all. And then you suggest to me that you're *compassionate*. You can go to hell, General." OrenThen turned and stalked away, putting distance between himself and Gau.

"That's your decision, then," Gau said, some time later.

"No," orenThen said, still facing away from the general. "It's not a decision I can make on my own. I need time to talk to my people, to let them know what their choices are."

"How much time do you need?" Gau said.

"The nights here are long," orenThen said. "Give me this one."

"It's yours," Gau said. OrenThen nodded and began to walk away.

"Chan," Gau began, walking toward the Whaid. OrenThen stopped and held up one of his massive paws to silence the general. Then he turned and held out his paws to Gau, who took them.

"I remember meeting you, you know," orenThen said. "I was there when the old ataFuey received the invitation to meet with you and every other race who would come to that damned cold rock of a moon you so grandly called neutral ground. I remember you standing at that podium, saying welcome in all the languages you could croak, and for the first time sharing your idea of the Conclave with us. And I remember turning to the ataFuey, and telling him that without a doubt, you were absolutely and totally madhouse insane."

Gau laughed.

"And then afterward you met with us, as you met with every embassy there who would hear you," orenThen said. "And I remember you trying to convince us that the Conclave was something we wanted to be a part of. I remember you winning me over."

"Because I wasn't truly madhouse insane," Gau said.

"Oh, no, General. You were," orenThen said. "Entirely and completely. But you were also *right*. And I remember thinking to myself, what if this mad general actually pulls it off? I tried to imagine it—our part of space, at peace. And I *couldn't*. It was like a white wall of stone in front of me, keeping me from seeing it. And that's when I knew *I* would fight for the Conclave. I couldn't see the peace it would bring. I couldn't even imagine it. All I knew was that I wanted it. And I knew that if anyone could bring it into being, it would be this mad general. I believed it." OrenThen let go of the general's hands. "It's so long ago now," he said.

"My old friend," Gau said.

"Old friend," orenThen agreed. "Old indeed. And now I must go. I'm glad to have seen you again, Tarsem. I truly am. These are not the circumstances I would have chosen, of course."

"Of course," Gau said.

"But isn't that the way of things. Life surprises." OrenThen turned again to go.

"How will I know when you've reached a decision?" Gau asked.

"You'll know," orenThen said, not looking back.

"How?" Gau asked.

"You'll hear it," orenThen said, and turned his head back to the general. "That much, I can promise." Then he turned back and walked to his transport, and with his escort drove away.

Gau's lieutenant approached him. "What did he mean when he said you'll hear his answer, General?" he asked.

"They chant," Gau said, and pointed toward the colony, still under spotlight. "Their highest art form is a ritualized chant. It's how they celebrate, and mourn, and pray. Chan was letting me know that when he's done talking with his colonists, they would chant their answer to me."

"Are we going to hear it from here?" the lieutenant asked.

Gau smiled. “You wouldn’t be asking that if you’d ever heard a Whaidi chant, Lieutenant.”

Gau waited the long night, listening, his vigil occasionally interrupted by the lieutenant or one of the other soldiers offering him a hot drink to keep him alert. It wasn’t until the colony’s sun rose out of the eastern sky that Gau heard what he was listening for.

“What is that?” the lieutenant asked.

“Quiet,” Gau said, and waved his annoyance. The lieutenant backed off. “They’ve begun their chanting,” Gau said a moment later. “Right now they’re chanting a welcome to the morning.”

“What does it mean?” the lieutenant asked.

“It means they’re welcoming the morning,” Gau said. “It’s *ritual*, Lieutenant. They do it every day.”

The morning prayer rose and fell in volume and intensity, continuing on for what seemed to the general a maddeningly long time. And then it came to a ragged, hesitant ending; Gau, who had been pacing through the latter parts of the morning prayer, stopped stock-still.

From the colony came a new chant, in a new rhythm, growing progressively louder. Gau listened to it for several long moments and then slumped, as if suddenly tired.

The lieutenant was at his side almost instantly. Gau waved him off. “I’m fine,” he said. “I’m fine.”

“What are they chanting now, General?” the lieutenant asked.

“Their anthem,” Gau said. “Their national anthem.” He stood up. “They’re saying that they won’t leave. They’re saying they would rather die as Whaidi than live under the Conclave. Every man, woman and child in that colony.”

“They’re crazy,” the lieutenant said.

“They’re patriots, Lieutenant,” Gau said, turning to the officer. “And they’ve chosen what they believe in. Don’t be disrespectful of that choice.”

“Sorry, General,” the lieutenant said. “I just don’t understand the choice.”

“I do,” Gau said. “I just hoped it would be different. Bring me a communicator.” The lieutenant hustled off. Gau turned his attention to

the colony, listening to its members chanting their defiance.

"You always were stubborn, old friend," Gau said.

The lieutenant returned with a communicator. Gau took it, keyed in his encrypted code and opened it to a common channel. "This is General Tarsem Gau," he said. "All ships recalibrate beam weapons and prepare to fire on my mark." The spotlights, still visible in the morning light, disappeared as the ships' weapons crews recalibrated their beams.

The chanting stopped.

Gau nearly dropped his communicator. He stood, mouth agape, staring at the colony. He walked slowly toward the edge of the bluff, whispering something softly. The lieutenant, standing nearby, strained to hear.

General Tarsem Gau was praying.

The moment held, suspended in the air. And then the colonists took up their anthem once more.

General Gau stood on the edge of the bluff overlooking a river, now silent, eyes closed. He listened to the anthem for what seemed like forever.

He raised his communicator.

"Fire," he said.

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NINE

Jane had gotten out of the medical bay and was waiting for me on the porch of our bungalow, eyes up at the stars.

"Looking for something?" I asked.

"Patterns," Jane said. "All the time we've been here, no one's made any constellations. I thought I'd try."

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Terrible," she said, looking at me. "It took me forever to see the constellations on Huckleberry, and they were already there. Making up new ones is even more trouble. I just see stars."

"Just focus on the bright ones," I said.

"That's a problem," Jane said. "My eyes are better than yours now. Better than everyone else's. They're *all* bright. That's probably why I never saw constellations until I came to Huckleberry. Too much information. You need human eyes to see constellations. Just another piece of my humanity taken away." She looked up again.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, watching her.

"I'm fine," Jane said. She raised up the hem of her shirt; the slash in her side was livid even in the dim light, but far less worrisome than it had been before. "Dr. Tsao patched it up, but it was healing even before she got to it. She wanted to take a blood sample to check for infection but I told her not to bother. It's all SmartBlood by now, anyway. I didn't tell her that." She dropped her hem.

"No green skin, though," I said.

"No," Jane said. "No cat's eyes, either. Or BrainPal. Which is not to say that I don't have increased capabilities. They're just not obvious, for which I'm grateful. Where have you been?"

"Watching the director's cut of the Whaidi colony annihilation," I said. Jane looked at me quizzically; I recounted what I'd just been watching.

"Do you believe it?" Jane asked me.

"Do I believe what?" I asked.

"That this General Gau was hoping not to destroy the colony," Jane said.

"I don't know," I said. "The discussion was honest enough. And if he simply wanted to destroy the colony, he could have done it without having to go through the mime show of trying to get the colony to surrender."

"Unless it was a terror tactic," Jane said. "Break the colonists' will, get them to surrender, destroy them anyway. Send the evidence to other races to demoralize them."

"Sure," I said. "That only makes sense if you're planning to subjugate the race. But that doesn't sound like how the Conclave is supposed to work. It sounds like it's a union of races, not an empire."

"I'd be careful of making assumptions based on one video," Jane said.

"I know," I said. "But it's bothering me. The video the CU gave us shows the Conclave simply destroying the Whaidi colony. We're supposed to see the Conclave as a threat. But the video I've just seen says to me it's not that simple."

"That's why it was edited out," Jane said.

"Because it's ambiguous?" I asked.

"Because it's confusing," Jane said. "The Colonial Union sent us here with specific instructions and gave us the information to support those instructions, without the information that would cause us to doubt them."

"You don't see that as a problem," I said.

"I see it as tactical," Jane said.

"But we've been working on the premise that the Conclave is an immediate and genocidal threat," I said. "This suggests it's not."

"You're back to making assumptions without much information," Jane said.

"*You* knew about the Conclave," I said. "Is a genocidal Conclave consistent with what you know?"

"No," Jane said. "But I've said before that what I know about the Conclave comes from Charles Boutin, who was actively planning treason against the Colonial Union. He's not credible."

"It still bothers me," I said. "I don't like it that all this information was kept from us."

"The Colonial Union manages information," Jane said. "It's how it keeps control. I've told you this before. It shouldn't be news now."

"It makes me wonder what else we don't know," I said. "And why."

"We can't know," Jane said. "We have the information the Colonial Union has provided us on the Conclave. We have what little I know. And we have this new portion of video. That's all we have."

I thought about it a minute. "No," I said. "We have something else."

"Can you two lie?" I asked Hickory. It and Dickory were standing in front of me in our bungalow's living room. I was sitting in my desk chair; Jane stood to my side. Zoë, whom we had woken up, was yawning on the couch.

"We have not yet lied to you," Hickory said.

"But you can clearly evade, since that's not what I asked you," I said.

"We can lie," Hickory said. "It is a benefit of consciousness."

"I wouldn't call it a benefit," I said.

"It opens up a number of intriguing possibilities in communication," Hickory said.

"I suppose that's true," I said. "None of which I'm interested in right now." I turned to Zoë. "Sweetheart, I want you to order these two to answer all my questions truthfully, without any lies or evasions."

"Why?" Zoë said. "What's going on?"

"Please do it, Zoë," I said. Zoë did as I asked.

"Thank you," I said. "You can go back to bed now, sweetie."

"I want to know what's going on," Zoë said.

"It's not something you need to worry about," I said.

"You order me to have these two tell you the truth, and you want me to believe it's *not* something I need to worry about?" Zoë said.

"Zoë," Jane said.

"Besides, if I leave there's no guarantee they won't lie to you," Zoë said, moving quickly before Jane could finish. Zoë knew she could negotiate with me; Jane was much more of a hard-ass. "They're emotionally equipped to lie to you, because they don't care about disappointing you. But they don't want to disappoint *me*."

I turned back to Hickory. "Is this true?" I asked.

"We would lie to you if we felt it was necessary," Hickory said. "We would not lie to Zoë."

"There you go," Zoë said.

"Breathe a word of this to anyone and you're spending the next year in a horse stall," I said.

"My lips are sealed," Zoë said.

"No," Jane said, and came over to Zoë. "I need you to understand that what you're hearing here you absolutely cannot share with anyone else. Not Gretchen. Not any of your other friends. Not anyone. It's not a game and it's not a fun secret. This is dead serious business, Zoë. If you're not ready to accept that, you need to leave this room right now. I'll take my chances with Hickory and Dickory lying to us, but not you. So do you understand that when we tell you not to share this with anyone, that you *cannot* share it with anyone else? Yes or no."

"Yes," Zoë said, staring up at Jane. "I understand, Jane. Not a word."

"Thank you, Zoë," Jane said, and then bent down and kissed the top of Zoë's head. "Go ahead," she said, to me.

"Hickory, you remember when we had the conversation where I told the two of you that I wanted you to hand over your consciousness implants," I said.

"Yes," said Hickory.

"We talked about the Conclave then," I said. "And you said that you didn't believe the Conclave was a threat to this colony."

"I said that we believed the threat to be negligible," Hickory said.

"Why do you believe that?" I asked.

"The Conclave prefers that colonies are evacuated rather than destroyed," Hickory said.

"How do you know this?" I said.

"From our own information on the Conclave, provided to us by our government," Hickory said.

"Why didn't you share this information with us before?" I asked.

"We were told not to," Hickory said.

"By whom?" I asked.

"By our government," Hickory said.

"Why would they tell you not to share this?" I asked.

"We have a standing order from our government not to share information with you on matters about which you are not substantially informed," Hickory said. "It is a courtesy to your government, which requires security and confidence from our own government on numerous matters. We have not lied to you, Dickory and I, but we are not allowed to volunteer information, either. You will recall before we left Huckleberry that we had asked you what you knew of the status of this part of space."

"Yes," I said.

"We were attempting to discover how much of our knowledge we were allowed to share with you," Hickory said. "We regret to say it did not appear you knew much. So we were not able to share much."

"You're sharing it now," I said.

"You're asking now," Hickory said. "And Zoë has told us not to lie."

"You've seen our video of the Conclave destroying the Whaidi colony," I said.

"Yes, when you shared it with all of your colonists," Hickory said.

"Did it match your own video?" I asked

"No," Hickory said. "Ours was much longer."

"Why would our version be so much shorter?" I asked.

"We cannot speculate why your government does the things it does," Hickory said.

I paused at this; the construction of the sentence left a lot of room for interpretation.

Jane jumped in. "You said the Conclave prefers to evacuate colonies rather than destroy them. Are you saying this because of the video or do you have other information?"

"We have other information," Hickory said. "The video shows only the first attempt by the Conclave to remove a colony."

"How many others have there been?" Jane asked.

"We do not know," Hickory said. "We have been out of communication with our government for the better part of a Roanoke year. However, when we left, the Conclave had removed seventeen colonies."

"How many of those were destroyed?" Jane asked.

"Three," Hickory said. "The rest were evacuated. In ten cases the colonists repatriated with their races. Four chose to join the Conclave."

"You have evidence of this," I said.

"The Conclave extensively documents each colony removal and shares it with every nonmember government," Hickory said. "We have information on all the removals up to our arrival here on Roanoke."

"Why?" Jane asked. "What relevance does this information have to the two of you?"

"Our government was well aware this colony was being founded despite the warnings of the Conclave," Hickory said. "And while we did not know for certain, we expected that the Colonial Union would attempt to hide this colony from the Conclave. When the Conclave found your colony, we were to show you this information."

"For what purpose?" Jane asked.

"To convince you to surrender the colony," Hickory said. "We could not allow it to be destroyed."

"Because of Zoë," I said.

"Yes," Hickory said.

"Wow," Zoë said.

"Quiet, sweetheart," I said. Zoë lapsed back into silence. I studied Hickory carefully. "What would happen if Jane and I chose not to surrender the colony?" I asked. "What if she and I decided the colony should be destroyed instead?"

"We would prefer not to say," Hickory said.

"Don't evade," I said. "Answer the question."

"We would kill you and Lieutenant Sagan," Hickory said. "You and any other colonist leader who would authorize the destruction of the colony."

"You would kill us?" I said.

"It would be difficult for us," Hickory allowed. "We would have to do it without our consciousness implants active, and I believe neither Dickory nor I would choose to activate them again. The emotions would be unbearable. Also, we are aware Lieutenant Sagan has been genetically altered back to Special Forces operational parameters. This would make killing her more difficult."

"How do you know that?" Jane said, surprised.

"We observe," Hickory said. "We know you try to hide it, Lieutenant. Small things reveal you. You chop vegetables far too quickly."

"What are they talking about?" Zoë asked Jane.

"Later, Zoë," Jane said, and turned her attention back to Hickory. "What about now?" Jane asked. "Would you still kill me and John?"

"If you choose to surrender the colony, yes," Hickory said.

"Don't you *dare*," Zoë said. She stood up, furious. "Under no circumstances will you do that."

Hickory and Dickory trembled with emotional overload, attempting to process Zoë's anger. "This one thing we must refuse you," Hickory eventually said to Zoë. "You are too important. To us. To all Obin."

Zoë was incandescent with rage. "I've already lost one parent because of the *Obin*," Zoë said.

"Everybody calm down," I said. "No one is killing anyone. All right? This is a nonissue. Zoë, Hickory and Dickory aren't going to kill us because we're not going to let the colony be destroyed. Simple as that. And there is no way I would let anything happen to *you*, Zoë. Hickory and Dickory and I *all* agree that you are too important for that."

Zoë took a sharp intake of breath and started sobbing. Jane reeled her in and sat her back down. I turned my attention to the two Obin.

"I want to make this clear to the two of you," I said. "In all circumstances, protect Zoë."

"We will," Hickory said. "Always."

"Good," I said. "Do *try* not to kill me in the process. Or Jane."

"We will try," Hickory said.

"Good," I said. "Settled. Let's move on." I had to stop a minute to recollect my thoughts; being informed I was an assassination target and Zoë's subsequent and entirely justified meltdown had well and truly rattled my cage. "You said there were seventeen colony removals that you know about," I said.

"Yes," Hickory said.

"Fourteen of them had the colonists survive, and four of those joined the Conclave," I said. "You mean those colonists joined, or the whole race joined?"

"The colonists joined," Hickory said.

"So none of the races whose colonies have been removed have joined the Conclave," I said.

"No," Hickory said. "This has been a matter of some concern within the Conclave itself. It was assumed that at least some of these races would then accept the invitation to join the Conclave. The removals seem to have hardened resolve otherwise."

"Races are not forced to join the Conclave," Jane said from the couch.

"No," Hickory said. "They are simply not allowed to expand further."

"I don't see how they could enforce that," I said. "It's a big universe."

"It is," Hickory said. "But no race has been willing to forgo administration of their colonies. There's always a way to discover the colonies."

"Except this one," I said. "That's why they've had us hide. It's more important for humans to survive in the universe than it is to control them."

"Perhaps," Hickory said.

"I want to see those files you have, Hickory," Jane said. "And the extended version of our video," she said to me.

"We will need to go to the technology lab to transfer them," Hickory said.

"No time like the present," I said. Jane and I kissed Zoë good night, and then we headed out the door to the Black Box, Hickory and Dickory taking the lead.

"Why did you say that in there?" Jane asked, as we walked.

"Say what?" I said.

"That we wouldn't allow the colony to be destroyed," Jane said.

"For one thing, our daughter was on the verge of a nervous breakdown thinking about Hickory and Dickory running us through with knives," I said. "And for another thing, if the options are surrendering and turning every man, woman and child in the colony into ash, I know what I'm going to do."

"You're making assumptions on limited information again," Jane said. "I need to look at those tapes before we make any sort of decision about anything. Until then, every option is on the table."

"I can already tell we're going to go round and round on this one," I said, and looked up at the stars. Jane looked up with me. "I wonder which one of those has Huckleberry around it," I said. "I think maybe we all should have stayed there. Then this would be someone else's problem. At least for a while."

"John," Jane said. I turned. She had stopped several steps behind me now and was still looking up.

"What?" I said. I looked up again. "Made a constellation?"

"There's a star up there that wasn't there before," Jane said, and pointed. "That one."

I squinted, and then realized it didn't matter whether I squinted or not, since I didn't know which stars were supposed to be there and which ones weren't. And then I saw it. Bright. And moving.

"Oh God," I said.

Jane shrieked and fell to the ground, clutching her head. I sprinted over to her. She was convulsing now. I tried to get hold of her and her arm whipped out, her hand smacking palm first onto the side of my head, slapping me hard into the ground. I saw a white flash and spent the next few indeterminate moments immobile, trying not to vomit.

Hickory and Dickory hauled me up from the dirt, one at each arm. I looked around groggily for Jane. She was no longer on the ground; instead she was stalking furiously, muttering like a mad woman. She stopped, arched her back and screamed like a banshee. I hollered myself, in total surprise.

Eventually she stalked over to me. "You're going to have to meet them without me, because right now I will fucking kill every last one of them," she said.

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"The fucking Colonial Union," Jane said, and stabbed a finger skyward. "That's them, and they're coming down now. Here."

"How do you know?" I said.

Jane looked away and laughed an eerie little laugh that I'd never heard from her before and sincerely hoped I never would again. "Yes. Well. Remember when we were talking earlier about my new abilities, and I said I didn't have a BrainPal?"

"Yes," I said.

"Yeah," Jane said. "Turns out, I was wrong."

"I have to tell you, I thought you'd be happy to see me," General Rybicki said. "Everyone else seems to be." He waved out my window to the street, which was filled with the early morning image of Roanokers going out of their minds with joy that their isolation was coming to an end. "Where's Sagan?"

"You need to tell me what the fuck is going on, General," I said.

Rybicki looked back toward me. "Excuse me?" he said. "I'm not your commanding officer anymore, Perry, but I'm still your superior. A little more respect would be in order."

"Fuck that," I said. "And fuck you too. There hasn't been a thing about this colony you've been straight about since you recruited us."

"I've been as honest with you as I could," Rybicki said.

"As honest as you could," I said, and there was no mistaking the incredulousness in my voice.

"Let me rephrase," Rybicki said. "I've been as honest with you as I've been allowed to be."

"You lied to me and Jane and an entire colony's worth of people," I said. "You've shunted us to the ass end of the universe and threatened us with annihilation from a group none of us even knew existed. You took colonists trained on modern equipment and forced them to colonize with ancient machines they barely knew how to use. If some of our colonists hadn't happened to have been Mennonites, the only thing you would have found here would have been bones. And because you didn't survey this planet well enough to know it has its own goddamned intelligent species, seven of my colonists have died in the last three days. So with all due *respect*, General, you can kiss my ass. Jane's not here because if she was, you'd probably already be dead. I'm not feeling any more charitable to you myself."

"Fair enough," Rybicki said, grimly.

"Now," I said. "Answers."

"Since you mentioned annihilation, you know about the Conclave," Rybicki said. "How much do you know?"

"I know what information you sent us," I said, neglecting to mention I knew anything else.

"Then you know that it is actively seeking out new colonies and getting rid of them," Rybicki said. "As you might expect, this is not going over well with the races who have had their colonies expunged. The Colonial Union has taken the lead in resisting the Conclave, and this colony has played a major role in that."

"How?" I said.

"By staying hidden," Rybicki said. "Christ, Perry, you've been here for almost a *year*. The Conclave has been going nuts looking for you. And every day it hasn't found you, the less terrifying it looks. The more it looks like what it is: the universe's biggest pyramid scheme. It's a system where a few strong races are leveraging the gullibility of a bunch of weaker races to snap up every habitable planet in sight. We've been using this colony as a lever to pry off some of those sucker races. We're destabilizing the Conclave before it can reach critical mass and crush us and everyone else with it."

"And this required deceiving everyone, including the crew of the *Magellan*," I said.

"Unfortunately, yes," Rybicki said. "Look. The number of people who knew about this had to be kept to an absolute bare minimum. The Secretary of Colonization. Me. General Szilard of the Special Forces and a few of his handpicked soldiers. I supervised the load out and engineered some of the colonial selection. It's not an *accident* you have Mennonites here, Perry. And it's not an accident you had enough ancient machinery to get you through. It's regrettable that we couldn't tell you, and I'm sorry that we couldn't see another way to do this. But I'm not going to apologize for it, because it *worked*."

"And how is this playing back home?" I said. "How do the home planets of our people feel about you playing with the lives of their friends and families?"

"They don't know," Rybicki said. "The existence of the Conclave is a state secret, Perry. We haven't told the individual colonies about it. It's not something they need to worry about yet."

"You don't think a federation of a few hundred other races in this part of space is something most people might want to know about," I said.

"I'm sure they'd want to know about it," Rybicki said. "And between you and me, if I had my way, they probably would know about it already. But it's not up to me, or you or any of us."

"So everyone still thinks we're lost," I said.

"They do," Rybicki said. "The second lost colony of Roanoke. You're famous."

"But you've just given the game away," I said. "You're *here*. When you go back, people are going to know we're here. And *my* people know about the Conclave."

"How do they know?" Rybicki asked.

"Because we *told* them," I said, disbelieving. "Are you serious? You expect me to tell people they can't use any technology more advanced than a mechanical combine and not give them a reason? I would have been the first death on the planet. So they know. And because *they* know, everyone they know back in the Colonial Union will know, too. Unless you plan to keep us stranded. In which case those same people who are jumping for joy outside that window will string you up by your thumbs."

"No, you're not being put back in the hole," Rybicki said. "On the other hand, you're not quite out of the hole yet, either. We're here to do two things. The first is to pick up the crew of the *Magellan*."

"For which they will no doubt be eternally grateful, although I expect Captain Zane wants his ship back," I said.

"The second thing is to let you know that all the equipment you haven't been using, you can now," Rybicki said. "Say good-bye to the second millennium. Welcome to modern times. You can't send messages back to the Colonial Union yet, though. There are still a few details to develop."

"Using modern equipment will give us away," I said.

"That's right," Rybicki said.

"You're giving me whiplash," I said. "We've spent a year hiding so you can weaken the Conclave, and now you want us to give ourselves away. Maybe I'm confused, but I'm not sure how getting ourselves slaughtered by the Conclave helps the Colonial Union."

"You're presuming you're going to get slaughtered," Rybicki said.

"Is there another option?" I asked. "If we ask nicely, will the Conclave just let us pack up and go?"

"That's not what I'm saying," Rybicki said. "I'm saying that the Colonial Union has kept you hidden because we needed to keep you hidden. Now we need to let the Conclave know where you are. We have something planned. And once we spring our little surprise, then there'll be no point keeping either you or the Conclave a secret from the colonies. Because the Conclave will have collapsed, and you will have been the key."

"You need to tell me *how*," I said.

"Fine," Rybicki said, and did.

• • •

"How are you?" I asked Jane, in the Black Box.

"I don't want to knife people anymore, if that's what you're asking," Jane said, and tapped her forehead, signifying the BrainPal nestled behind it. "I'm still not happy about this."

"How could you not know it was there?" I asked.

"BrainPals are remotely activated," Jane said. "I couldn't have turned it on myself. Rybicki's ship sent out a search signal; the signal woke up the BrainPal. Now it's on. Listen, I've gone through the files Hickory gave me."

"All of them?" I asked.

"Yes," Jane said. "I've been completely made over and have the BrainPal. I can go back to Special Forces processing speed."

"And?" I asked.

"They check out," Jane said. "Hickory has video and documentation from Conclave sources, which is suspect. But he has corroborating material for each case, from Obin sources, from the races whose colonies were removed and from the Colonial Union, too."

"They could all be faked," I said. "It could be a monumental hoax."

"No," Jane said. "The Colonial Union files have a verification hash in the metatext. I ran them through the BrainPal. They're genuine."

"Certainly gives you an appreciation for ol' Hickory, doesn't it," I said.

"It does," Jane said. "He wasn't lying when he said the Obin wouldn't send just anyone to be with Zoë. Although from what I can see from these files, it's Dickory who is the superior of the two."

"Jesus," I said. "Just when you think you know a guy. Or gal. Or creature of indeterminate gender, which is what it is."

"It's not indeterminate," Jane said. "It's both."

"What about this General Gau," I said. "Do your files have anything on him?"

"Some," Jane said. "Just the basics. He's Vrenn, and what he says in the extended tape of ours appears to be correct; after the battle with the Kies he began agitating to create the Conclave. It didn't go over at first. He was thrown into prison for political agitation. But then the Vrenn ruler met an unfortunate end and the general was released by the next regime."

I raised an eyebrow. "Assassination?" I asked.

"No," Jane said. "Chronic sleep disorder. Fell asleep while eating and fell face forward on his dinner knife. Penetrated the brain. Died instantly. The general probably could have ruled Vrennu but decided to

attempt the Conclave instead. He still doesn't rule Vrennu. It wasn't even one of the Conclave's founding members."

"When I was talking to Rybicki, he said that the Conclave was a pyramid scheme," I said. "Some of the races at the top were getting the benefits and those at the bottom were getting pissed on."

"Maybe," Jane said. "From what I saw in the files the first colony worlds the Conclave opened up were populated by relatively few races. But whether that was indicative of some races getting an advantage, or of matching the races to the planet, is not something I could tell you. Even if it is the former, it's not any different than what's happening here. This colony is entirely settled by the oldest human colonies, the ones that existed before the Colonial Union. Ethnically and economically they're nothing like the rest of the colonies."

"Do you think the Conclave is a threat to us?" I asked Jane.

"Of course I do," Jane said. "These files make it clear that the Conclave will destroy a colony that doesn't surrender. Their mode of operation is always the same: Fill the sky with starships and have every single one fire on the colony. Major cities wouldn't survive that, much less a colony. Roanoke would be vaporized instantly."

"But do you think it's likely?" I asked.

"I don't know," Jane said. "I have better data than I did before, but the data are still incomplete. We're missing the better part of a year of information, and I don't think we're going to get any more. Not from the Colonial Union, anyway. I can tell you right now I'm not cleared to see the Colonial Union files that Hickory gave me. And no matter what, I'm not inclined to surrender the colony without a fight. Did you tell Rybicki what we know?"

"No," I said. "And I don't think we should tell him what we know, either. At least not yet."

"You don't trust him," Jane said.

"Let's just say I have concerns," I said. "Rybicki didn't go out of his way to offer up anything, either. I asked him if he thought the Conclave would let us just walk away from this planet if we wanted to, and he suggested that they wouldn't."

"He lied to you," Jane said.

"He chose to respond differently than total honesty would dictate," I said. "I'm not sure that's exactly a lie."

"You don't see that as a problem," Jane said.

"I see it as tactical," I said. Jane smiled at the reversal of our earlier conversation. "But it also suggests to me that we may not want to swallow every line he gives us. We've been maneuvered before. I don't doubt we're being maneuvered again."

"You sound like Trujillo," Jane said.

"I wish I *did* sound like Trujillo," I said. "He started off thinking all this was about a political scuffle he was having with the Secretary of Colonization. At this point, that seems adorably quaint. Our situation is like a puzzle box, Jane. Every time I think I know what's going on, suddenly there's another layer of complications. I just want to get this damn thing solved."

"We don't have enough information to solve it," Jane said. "All of Hickory's information checks out, but it's old and we don't know whether the Conclave policies have changed, or whether they're solidifying their power or falling apart. The Colonial Union hasn't been forthcoming with us, but I can't tell if that was malicious or if it was choosing what information to provide us so we could do our job without distraction. Both the Conclave and the Colonial Union have an agenda. But neither agenda is clear from any of the data we have, and we're stuck in the middle."

"There's a word for that," I said. "*Pawn*."

"Whose pawn, is the question," Jane said.

"I think I know," I said. "Let me tell you the latest wrinkle."

"I can think of about a dozen different ways that could go wrong," Jane said, after I finished.

"Same here," I said. "And I'd be willing to bet they're not the same dozen."

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TEN

A week after arriving in the Roanoke sky, the CUS *Sacajawea* headed for Phoenix, carrying with it 190 of the former crew of the *Magellan*. Fourteen crew members stayed behind; two had married colonists in the interim, another one was pregnant and not wanting to face her husband, one suspected there was a warrant waiting for him if he returned to Phoenix, and the other ten simply wanted to stay. Another two crew members also stayed behind; they had died, one through a heart attack and another through a drunken misadventure with farm machinery. Captain Zane had said his good-byes to all his living remaining crew, promised he'd find a way to get them their back pay, and then lit out. He was a good man, but I didn't blame him for wanting to be back in CU space.

When the *Sacajawea* returned to Phoenix, the *Magellan* crew members were not allowed to go home. Roanoke had been a largely unexplored colony world; its flora, fauna and diseases were unknown and potentially lethal to the unexposed. The entire crew was to be quarantined in a wing of the CDF medical facilities at Phoenix Station for a standard month. Needless to say the *Magellan* crew came close to rioting at the news. A compromise was reached: The Magellan crew members would remain in quarantine, but each would be allowed to contact a small number of loved ones on the condition that loved ones kept quiet about the crew's return until the CU officially released the news that the lost colony of Roanoke had been found. Everyone, crew members and family, happily agreed to the terms.

Needless to say, word of the *Magellan*'s crews' return leaked instantly. News media and colonial governments who tried to learn more were met with official denials from the CU government and unofficial warnings that publishing the news would lead to impressively negative consequences; the story officially remained buried. But word spread among the families of the *Magellan* crew, and from them to friends and colleagues, and from there to the crews of other civilian and military spaceships. The story was quietly confirmed by members of the *Sacajawea* crew, who, despite having landed on Roanoke and all having been exposed to members of the *Magellan* crew, were not under quarantine themselves.

The Colonial Union does not have many allies in known space, but it has a few; soon enough the crews of allied ships heard of the return of the *Magellan* crew as well. These crews manned their ships and traveled to other ports, some of which were not at all friendly to the Colonial Union, and some of which belonged to members of the Conclave. It was there that some of these crew members transmuted their knowledge of the return of the *Magellan* crew into ready cash. It was no secret that the Conclave was looking for the lost colony of Roanoke; it was likewise no secret that the Conclave was happy to pay for reliable information.

Some of those who volunteered information found themselves encouraged by the Conclave, in the form of genuinely unspeakable amounts of wealth, to discover just where in the universe the *Magellan* crew had been all this time. This information would be difficult to come by, which is why the reward was so unimaginably high. But as it happened, shortly after the *Sacajawea* returned to Phoenix Station, its assistant navigator was fired for being intoxicated at his post. The officer now found himself on a blacklist; he would never again travel the stars. A fear of destitution plus a desire for petty revenge caused this former navigator to let it be known that he was in possession of information he had heard others would be interested in, and would be willing to share it for a sum he felt would make up for the wrongs he had suffered at the hands of the Colonial Union's civilian space fleet. He got the sum; he handed over coordinates for the Roanoke colony.

Thus it was, just three days into Roanoke colony's second year, a single ship appeared in the sky above us. It was the *Gentle Star*, bearing General Gau, who sent his compliments to me as the colony leader and bade me to meet him to discuss the future of my world. It was the third of Magellan. According to the intelligence estimates of the Colonial Defense Forces, begun before the "leak" was set into motion, General Gau was right on time.

"You have lovely sunsets here," General Gau said, through a translator device slung on a lanyard. The sun had set some minutes before.

"I've heard this line before," I said.

I had come alone, leaving Jane to manage the anxiety-filled colonists at Croatoan. General Gau's shuttle had landed a klick from the village, across the stream. There were no homesteads here yet. At the shuttle, a squad of soldiers eyed me as I walked past. Their demeanor suggested they did not consider me much of a threat to the general. They were correct. I had no intention of trying to harm him. I wanted to see how much of him I recognized from the versions of him I had seen on video.

Gau motioned gracefully at my response. "My apologies," he said. "I don't mean it to be insincere. Your sunsets actually are lovely."

"Thank you," I said. "I can't take credit for them; I didn't make this world. But I appreciate the compliment."

"You're welcome," Gau said. "And I am pleased to hear that your government made information about our colony removals available to you. There was some concern that it would not."

"Really," I said.

"Oh yes," Gau said. "We know how tightly the Colonial Union controls the flow of information. We worried that we would arrive here, you would know nothing of us—or know something incomplete—and that lack of information would cause you to do something irrational."

"Like not surrender the colony," I said.

"Yes," Gau said. "Surrendering the colony would be the best course, in our opinion," Gau said. "Have you ever been in the military, Administrator Perry?"

"I have," I said. "Colonial Defense Forces."

Gau looked me over. "You're not green," he said.

"Not anymore," I said.

"I assume that you commanded troops," Gau said.

"I did," I said.

"Then you know that it is no shame to surrender when your forces are outnumbered, outgunned and you face an honorable adversary," Gau said. "One who respects your command of your people and who would treat you as he would expect you to treat his own troops, if the situation were reversed."

"I regret to say that in my experience in the CDF, the number of opponents we faced who would have taken our surrender was rather small," I said.

"Yes, well," Gau said. "An artifact of your own policies, Administrator Perry. Or the policies of the CDF, which you were obliged to follow. You humans are not especially good at taking the surrender of other species."

"I'll be willing to make an exception for you," I said.

"Thank you, Administrator Perry," Gau said. Even through his translator I could sense his dry amusement. "I don't believe it will be necessary."

"I hope you'll change your mind," I said.

"I was hoping *you* might surrender to *me*," Gau said. "If you have seen the information on how the Conclave has handled our previous removals, then you know that when colonies surrender to us, we honor their sacrifice. No harm will come to any of your people."

"I've seen how you've handled these before—the ones where you've not blown up the colony," I said. "But I've heard *we* are a special case. You've been deceived by the Colonial Union as to where we would be. We've made the Conclave look foolish."

"Yes, the disappearing colony," Gau said. "We were waiting for you, you know. We knew when your ship was supposed to skip. You were going to be welcomed by several ships, including mine. Your people wouldn't have even made it off the ship."

"You were planning to destroy the *Magellan*," I said.

"No," Gau said. "Not unless it attempted to attack or begin colonizing. Otherwise, we would have simply escorted the ship to skip distance to return to Phoenix. But you deceived us, as you say, and it's taken us this long to find you. You may say it made the Conclave look foolish. We believe it made the Colonial Union look desperate. And we *did* find you."

"It only took a year," I said.

"And it might have taken another after this," Gau said. "Or we might have found you tomorrow. It was only an issue of *when* we would find you, Administrator Perry. Not if. And I would ask you to consider that. Your government risked your life, and the life of every member of your colony, to make a shadow play of defiance against us. This was a futile colonization. Sooner or later we would have found you. We *have* found you. And here we are."

"You seem irritated, General," I said.

The general performed something with his mouth I assumed was a smile. "I *am* irritated," he admitted. "I've wasted time and resources better spent building the Conclave looking for your colony. And fending off political feints by members of the Conclave who have taken your government's insolence personally. There is a substantial group of Conclave members who want to punish your government by attacking humanity at its heart—by attacking Phoenix directly."

I felt simultaneous washes of anxiety and relief come over me. When Gau said "attacking humanity at its heart," I assumed he meant Earth; his mention of Phoenix reminded me that the only people who thought of Earth as the heart of humanity were those who were born there. As far as the rest of the universe was concerned, Phoenix was humanity's home planet. "If your Conclave is as strong as you suggest, then you could attack Phoenix," I said.

"We could," Gau said. "And we could destroy it. We could wipe out every other human colony as well, and if I may speak frankly to you, there are not very many races out there, in the Conclave or out of it, who would complain much about it. But I'll tell you what I've told those in the Conclave who want to make you extinct: The Conclave is not an engine of conquest."

"So you say," I said.

"I do say," Gau said. "This has been the hardest thing to make people understand, both in the Conclave and out of it. Empires of conquest don't last, Administrator Perry. They hollow out from within, from the greed of rulers and the endless appetite for war. The Conclave is not an empire, and I don't want to make humanity extinct, Administrator Perry. I want it to become *part* of the Conclave. Barring that, I'll leave it to its own devices, on the worlds it had before the Conclave, and only those. But I'd rather have you as part of us. Humanity is strong and incredibly resourceful. It's become immensely successful in a short period of time. There are races who have been among the stars for thousands of your years who have not accomplished as much or colonized as successfully."

"I've wondered about that," I said. "So many other races have been around and colonizing for so long, and yet *we* had to go to the stars to find any of *you*."

"I have an answer for that," Gau said. "But I guarantee you won't like it."

"Tell me anyway," I said.

"We invested in fighting more than we did in exploring," Gau said.

"That's a pretty simplistic answer, General," I said.

"Look at our civilizations," Gau said. "We're all the same size because we limit each other through war. We're all at the same level of technology, because we bargain, trade and steal from each other. We all inhabit the same area of space because that is where we began, and we choose to control our colonies rather than let them develop without us. We fight over the same planets and only occasionally explore to find new ones, which we all then squabble over like carrion animals fighting over a carcass. Our civilizations are at an equilibrium, Administrator Perry. An artificial equilibrium that is sliding all of us toward entropy. This was happening before humans arrived in this part of space. Your arrival punctured that equilibrium for a while. But now you've settled in the same pattern of stealing and squabbling as the rest of us."

"I don't know about that," I said.

"Indeed," Gau said. "Let me ask you, Administrator Perry, how many of humanity's planets were freshly discovered? And how many

were simply taken from other races? How many planets have humans lost to other races?"

I thought back to the day we arrived above the other planet, the fake Roanoke, and remembered the questions of journalists, asking who we took the planet from. It was assumed it was taken; it didn't occur to them to ask if it was newly discovered. "This planet is new," I said.

"And the reason for that is that your government was trying to *hide* you," Gau said. "Even a culture as vital as your own now explores primarily out of desperation. You're trapped in the same stagnant patterns as the rest of us. Your civilization will slowly run down like the rest of ours would."

"And you think the Conclave will change this," I said.

"In any system, there is a factor that limits growth," Gau said. "Our civilizations operate as a system, and our limiting factor is war. Remove that factor and the system thrives. We can focus on cooperation. We can explore rather than fight. If there had been a Conclave, perhaps we *would* have met you before you came out and met us. Perhaps we'll explore now and find new races."

"And do what with them?" I asked. "There's an intelligent race on this planet. Besides mine, I mean. We met them in a rather unfortunate way, and some of us ended up dead. It took some doing on my part to convince our colonists not to kill every one of them we could find. What will *you* do, General, when you meet a new race on a planet you want for the Conclave?"

"I don't know," General Gau said.

"Excuse me?" I said.

"Well, I don't," Gau said. "It hasn't happened yet. We've been busy consolidating our positions with the races we know about and the worlds that have already been explored. We haven't had time to explore. It hasn't come up."

"I'm sorry," I said. "That wasn't an answer I was expecting."

"We're at a very sensitive moment, Administrator Perry, concerning the future of your colonists," Gau said. "I won't unnecessarily complicate things by lying. Especially not about something as trivial to our current situation as a hypothetical."

"At the very least, General Gau, I'd like to believe that," I said.

"That's a start, then," Gau said. He looked me up and down. "You said that you were in your Colonial Defense Forces," he said. "From what I know about humans, that means you're not originally from the Colonial Union. You're from Earth. Is that right?"

"That's right," I said.

"Humans are really very interesting," Gau said. "You're the only race who has chosen to change your home world. Voluntarily, that is. You're not the only ones to recruit your military from only one world, but you are the only ones to do it from a world that is not your primary world. I'm afraid we've never quite understood the relationship between Earth and Phoenix, and with the rest of the colonies. It doesn't make much sense to the rest of us. Perhaps one day I can get you to explain it to me."

"Perhaps," I said, carefully.

Gau took the tone for what he thought it was. "But not today," he said.

"I'm afraid not," I said.

"A pity," Gau said. "This has been an interesting conversation. We've done thirty-six removals. This is the last one. And in all but this and the first, the leaders of the colonies have not had much to say."

"It's difficult to have a casual conversation with someone who is ready to vaporize you if you don't give in to his demands," I said.

"This is true enough," Gau said. "But leadership is at least a little about character. So many of these colony leaders seemed to lack that. It makes me wonder if these colonies were begun at all seriously, or simply to see if we meant to enforce our ban on colonies. Although there was the one who tried to assassinate me."

"Clearly not successful," I said.

"No, not at all," Gau said, and motioned toward his soldiers, who were attentive but kept a respectful distance. "One of my soldiers shot her before she could stab me. There's a reason I have these meetings in the open."

"Not just for the sunsets, then," I said.

"Sadly, no," Gau said. "And as you might imagine, killing the colony leader made dealing with her second-in-command a tense affair.

But this was a colony we eventually evacuated. Aside from the colony leader, there was no bloodshed."

"But you haven't turned away from bloodshed," I said. "If I refuse to evacuate this colony, you won't hesitate to destroy it."

"No," Gau said.

"And from what I understand, none of the races whose colonies you've removed—violently or otherwise—have since joined the Conclave," I said.

"That's true," Gau said.

"You're not exactly winning hearts and minds," I said.

"I'm not familiar with this term of yours," Gau said. "But I understand it well enough. No, these races haven't become part of the Conclave. But it's unrealistic to assume they would. We've just removed their colonies, and they were unable to stop us from doing so. You don't humiliate someone like that and expect them to come around to your way of thinking."

"They could become a threat if they joined together," I said.

"I'm aware your Colonial Union is trying to make that happen," Gau said. "There's not much that happens now that we're not aware of, Administrator Perry, including that. But the Colonial Union has tried this before; it helped create a 'Counter-Conclave' while we were still forming. It didn't work then. We're not convinced it will work now."

"You could be wrong," I said.

"I could be," Gau said. "We will see. In the meantime, however, I must come to it. Administrator Perry, I am asking you to surrender your colony to me. If you will, we will help your colonists safely return to their home worlds. Or you may choose to become part of the Conclave, independent of your government. Or you may refuse and be destroyed."

"Let me make you a counteroffer," I said. "Leave this colony alone. Send a drone to your fleet, which I know is at skip distance and ready to arrive. Tell it to stay where it is. Gather up your soldiers over there, return to your ship, and go. Pretend you never found us. Just let us be."

"It's too late for that," General Gau said.

"I figured it would be," I said. "But I want you to remember the offer was there."

Gau looked at me quietly for a long moment. “I suspect I know what you are going to say to my offer, Administrator Perry,” he said. “Before you say it, let me beg you to reconsider. Remember that you have options here, true options. I know the Colonial Union has given you orders, but remember that you can be led by your own conscience. The Colonial Union is humanity’s government, but there is more to humanity than the Colonial Union. And you don’t seem to be a man who is pushed into things, by me, by the Colonial Union or by anyone else.”

“If you think I’m tough, you should meet my wife,” I said.

“I would like that,” Gau said. “I think I would like that very much.”

“I would like to say that you are right,” I said. “I would like to say that I can’t be pushed into things. But I suspect that I can be. Or perhaps I can have things pushed into me that I can’t resist. This is one of those times. Right now, General, I have no options, except one option that I shouldn’t be offering you. And that is to ask you to leave now, before you call your fleet, and let Roanoke stay lost. Please consider it.”

“I can’t,” Gau said. “I’m sorry.”

“I can’t surrender this colony,” I said. “Do what you will, General.”

Gau looked back toward one of his soldiers and gave him a signal.

“How long will this take?” I asked.

“Not long,” Gau said.

He was right. Within minutes, the first ships arrived, new stars in the sky. Less than ten minutes later, they had all arrived.

“So many,” I said. There were tears in my eyes.

General Gau noticed. “I will give you time to return to your colony, Administrator Perry,” he said. “And I promise it will be quick and painless. Be strong for your people.”

“I’m not crying for my people, General,” I said.

The General stared at me and then looked up in time to see the first of the ships in his fleet explode.

Anything is possible, given time and the will.

The Colonial Union certainly had the will to destroy the Conclave's fleet. The existence of the fleet was an intolerable threat; the Colonial Union decided to destroy it as soon as it learned of its existence. There was no hope that the Colonial Union could destroy the fleet in a toe-to-toe battle; with 412 battleship equivalents, it was larger than the entire CDF battle fleet. The Conclave fleet was assembled in whole only when removing the colonies, so there was the possibility of attacking each ship individually. But that would have been equally futile; each ship could be replaced in the fleet by its government, and it meant the Colonial Union would be picking a fight with each of the more than four hundred races in the Conclave, many of whom posed no real threat to the CU.

But the Colonial Union wanted to more than destroy the Conclave's fleet. It wanted to humiliate and destabilize the Conclave; to strike at the heart of its mission and its credibility. The Conclave's credibility came from its size and its ability to enforce its ban on colonization. The Colonial Union needed to hit at the Conclave in a way that would neutralize its size advantage and make a mockery of its ban. It had to strike at the Conclave at precisely the moment it was showing its strength: When it was attempting to remove a colony. One of *our* colonies.

Only the Colonial Union had no new colonies under threat from the Conclave. The most recent new colony, Everest, slipped in mere weeks before the Conclave's ban. It was not under threat. Another colony would need to be founded.

Enter Manfred Trujillo and his crusade to colonize. The Department of Colonization had ignored him for years, and not simply because the Secretary of Colonization hated his guts. It had long been understood that the best way to keep a planet was to grow so many people on it that it was impossible to kill all of them efficiently. Colonial populations were needed to make more colonists, not more colonies. *Those* could be founded with surplus population from Earth. Barring the appearance of the Conclave, Trujillo could have campaigned to colonize until he was put into the ground and he wouldn't have gotten anywhere.

But now Trujillo's campaign became useful. The Colonial Union had kept the fact of the Conclave from the colonies themselves, as it had so many other things. Sooner or later, however, the colonies would need to be made aware of its existence; the Conclave was simply too big to ignore. The Colonial Union wanted to establish the Conclave as the enemy, in no uncertain terms. It also wanted the colonies to be invested in the struggle against the Conclave.

Because the Colonial Defense Forces were comprised of recruits from Earth—and because the Colonial Union encouraged the colonies to focus primarily on their local politics and issues rather than CU-wide concerns—colonists rarely thought of anything that didn't involve their own planet. But by stocking Roanoke with colonists from the ten most-populated human planets, Roanoke would become the direct concern of more than half the population of the Colonial Union, as would its struggle against the Conclave. In all, a neat potential solution to a raft of issues.

Trujillo was informed that his initiative was being approved; then it was taken away from him. *That* was because Secretary Bell hated his guts. But it also served to remove him from the command loop. Trujillo was too smart not to have picked up the pieces if they were laid out in a way he could follow. It also helped create a political subtext that pitted the founding colonies against each other for a leadership position; this drew attention away from what the CU was really planning for the colony.

Add in two colony leaders dropped in at the last moment, and no one in Roanoke's command structure would have the context to muck up the Colonial Union's plan: to create the time and the opportunity to destroy the Conclave's fleet. Time created by hiding Roanoke.

Time was critical. When the Colonial Union concocted its plan, it was too early to implement it. Even if the Colonial Union could have moved against the Conclave, other races whose colonies were threatened by the Conclave would not follow in the CU's footsteps. The Colonial Union needed time to create a constituency of allies. The best way to do that, it was decided, would be to have them lose their colonies *first*. These races, with their amputated colonies, would see the hidden colony Roanoke as evidence that even the mighty Conclave

could be confounded, raising the Colonial Union's status among them and cultivating potential allies for when the moment was right.

Roanoke was a symbol, too, for some of the more dissatisfied members of the Conclave, who saw the burden of its grand designs fall on them without the immediate benefits they had hoped to gain. If the humans could defy the Conclave and get away with it, what value was there in being in the Conclave at all? Every day Roanoke stayed hidden was a day these lesser Conclave members would stew in their own dissatisfaction with the organization they'd surrendered their sovereignty to.

Primarily, however, the Colonial Union needed time for another reason entirely. It needed time to identify each of the 412 ships that comprised the Conclave's fleet. It needed time to discover where these ships would be when the fleet was not in action. It needed time to position a Gameran Special Forces soldier, just like Lieutenant Stross, in the general area of each of these ships. Like Stross, each of these Special Forces members were adapted to the rigors of space. Like Stross, each of them was covered in embedded nano-camouflage that would allow them to approach and even secure themselves on these ships, unseen, for days or possibly weeks. Unlike Stross, each of these Special Forces soldiers wielded a small but powerful bomb, in which perhaps a dozen grams of fine-grained antimatter were suspended in vacuum.

When the *Sacajawea* returned with the crew of the *Magellan*, the Gamerans prepared themselves for their task. They silently and invisibly hid themselves in the hulls of their target spacecraft and went with them as they assembled at the agreed-upon rendezvous point, and readied themselves for yet another awe-inspiring mass entrance above a world filled with cowering colonists. When the skip drone from the *Gentle Star* popped into space, the Gamerans oh-so-*gently* placed their bombs on the hulls of their respective starships and then just floated off the ship hulls before the ships made their skip. They didn't want to be around when those bombs went off.

They didn't need to be. The bombs were remotely triggered by Lieutenant Stross, who, stationed a safe distance away, polled the bombs to make sure they were all accounted for and active, and

detonated them in a sequence determined by him to have the greatest aesthetic impact. Stross was a quirky fellow.

The bombs, when triggered, fired the antimatter like a shotgun blast onto the hulls of their spaceships, spreading the antimatter across a wide surface area to ensure the most efficient annihilation of matter and antimatter. It worked beautifully, and terribly.

Much of this I learned much later, under different circumstances. But even in my time with General Gau, I knew this much: Roanoke was never a colony in the traditional sense of the term. Its purpose never was to give humans another home, or to extend our reach in the universe. It existed as a symbol of defiance, as a creator of time, and as a honey trap to lure a being who dreamed of changing the universe, and to destroy that dream while he watched.

As I said, anything is possible, given the time and the will. We had the time. We had the will.

General Gau stared as his fleet blew itself apart silently but brilliantly. Behind us his soldiers squalled horribly, confused and terrified by what they were seeing.

"You knew," Gau said, in a whisper. He did not stop looking at the sky.

"I knew," I said. "And I tried to warn you, General. I asked you not to call your fleet."

"You did," Gau said. "I can't imagine why your masters let you."

"They didn't," I said.

Gau turned to me then, wearing a face whose map I could not read, but which I sensed expressed profound horror, and yet, even now, curiosity. "*You* warned me," Gau said. "On your own initiative."

"I did," I said.

"Why would you do that?" Gau asked.

"I'm not entirely sure," I admitted. "Why did *you* decide to try to remove colonists instead of killing them?"

"It's the moral thing to do," Gau said.

"Maybe that's why I did it," I said, looking up to where the explosions continued their brilliance. "Or maybe I just didn't want the

blood of all those people on my hands."

"It wasn't your decision," Gau said. "I have to believe that."

"It wasn't," I said. "But that doesn't matter."

Eventually the explosions stopped.

"Your own ship was spared, General Gau," I said.

"Spared," he repeated. "Why?"

"Because that was the plan," I said. "Your ship, and yours alone. You have safe passage from Roanoke to skip distance, back to your own territory, but you must leave now. This guarantee of safe passage expires in an hour unless you are on your way. I'm sorry, but I don't know what your equivalent measure of time is. Suffice to say you should hurry, General."

Gau turned and bellowed at one of his soldiers, and then bellowed again when it became clear they weren't paying attention. One came over; he covered his translator and spoke something to him in their own language. The soldier sprinted back to the others, yelling as he went.

He turned back to me. "This will make things difficult," he said.

"With all due respect, General," I said. "I think that was the intent."

"No," Gau said. "You don't understand. I told you there are those in the Conclave who want to eradicate humanity. To annihilate all of you as you've just annihilated my fleet. It will be harder now to hold them back. They are part of the Conclave. But they still have their own ships and their own governments. I don't know what will happen now. I don't know if I can control them after this. I don't know if they will listen to me anymore."

A squad of soldiers approached the general to retrieve him, two of them training their weapons on me. The general barked something; the weapons came down. Gau took a step toward me. I fought the urge to take a step back and held my ground.

"Look to your colony, Administrator Perry," Gau said. "It is no longer hidden. From this moment forward, it will be infamous. People will want revenge for what has happened here. All of the Colonial Union will be a target. But *this* is where it happened."

"Will you take your revenge, General?" I asked.

"No," Gau said. "No Conclave ships or troops under my command will return here. This is my word to you. To *you*, Administrator Perry. You tried to warn me. I owe you this courtesy. But I can only control my own ships and my own troops." He motioned to his squad. "Right now, these are the troops I control. And I have only one ship under my command. I hope you understand what I am saying to you."

"I do," I said.

"Then fare you well, Administrator Perry," Gau said. "Look to your colony. Keep it safe. I hope for your sake that it will not be as difficult as I expect it will be." Gau turned and paced double-time to his shuttle to make his departure. I watched him go.

"*The plan is simple*," General Rybicki had told me. "*We destroy his fleet, all of it, except for his ship. He returns to the Conclave and struggles to keep control of it all as it flies apart. That's why we keep him alive, you know. Even after this, some will still be loyal to him. The civil war the Conclave members will have with themselves in the aftermath will destroy the Conclave. The civil war will weaken the capabilities of its races of the Conclave far more effectively than if General Gau died and the Conclave disbanded. In a year, the Conclave will smash itself to bits, and the Colonial Union will be in a position to pick up most of the big pieces.*"

I watched Gau's shuttle launch, streaking up into the night.

I hoped General Rybicki was right.

I didn't think he would be.

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ELEVEN

Data from the defense satellite the Colonial Union parked above Roanoke would tell us that the missile cluster that attacked the colony popped into existence on the gasping edge of the planet's atmosphere and deployed its payload of five rockets almost instantly, blasting the weapons from a cold start into the ever-thickening atmosphere.

The heat shields on two of the rockets failed during the weapons' entry, collapsing against the white-hot bow wave of the atmosphere. They exploded violently, but not nearly as violently as they would have if their payloads had been armed. Failures at their task, they burned away harmlessly in the upper atmosphere.

The defense satellite tracked the three other rockets and beamed an attack warning to the colony. The message took over every one of the newly reactivated PDAs in the colony and broadcast the warning that an attack was imminent. Colonists dropped their dinner plates, grabbed their children and headed toward the community shelters in the village or family shelters out on the farms. Out among the Mennonite farms, recently installed sirens wailed on the edges of properties.

Closer to town, Jane remotely activated the colony's defense array, hastily installed once Roanoke was allowed to use modern machinery. *Defense array* was a grand term for what the defenses were; in this case a series of linked, automated land defenses and two beam turrets at opposite ends of Croatoan village. The beam turrets could theoretically destroy the rockets blasting their way toward us, provided we had the energy to power them fully. We didn't; our energy grid was powered by

solar power. It was sufficient for the colony's day-to-day energy consumption but woefully inadequate for the intense power the beam weapons required. Each of the turret's internal power cells could provide five seconds of full use or fifteen seconds of low power use. The low power level might not destroy a missile entirely, but it could fry its navigation core, knocking the thing off-course.

Jane powered down the land guns. We wouldn't be needing those. She then made a direct connection to the defense satellite and dumped data into her BrainPal at full speed, the better to understand what she would need to do with the beam turrets.

While Jane powered up our defenses the defense satellite determined which of the rockets represented the most immediate threat to the colony and blasted it with its own energy beam. The satellite scored a direct hit and punched a hole into the missile; its sudden lack of aerodynamics tore the thing apart. The satellite retargeted and hit the second of the three remaining rockets, hitting its engine. The missile veered crazily into the sky, the navigation systems unable to compensate for the damage. The missile eventually came down somewhere, so far away from us that we gave it no further thought.

The defense satellite, its own power cells depleted, was unable to do anything about the final missile; it forwarded speed and trajectory data to Jane, who passed the data immediately to the beam turrets. They came online and started tracking.

Beam weapons are focused and coherent but lose energy with distance; Jane maximized the effectiveness of her turrets by allowing the missile to close distance before firing. Jane chose to fire full-throttle at the missile, opening up with both turrets. It was the right decision, because the missile proved incredibly tough. Even with both turrets firing Jane managed only to kill the missile's brain, knocking out its weapons, engines and navigation. The missile died just above the colony, but its inertia propelled it forward and down at incredible speed.

The dead missile hit the ground a klick outside the village, gouging an unholy gash into fallow fields and spraying propellant into the air, where it ignited. The shock wave from the explosion was a fraction of what it would have been if the missile's payload had been armed, but

was still enough to knock me on my ass a kilometer away and take away my hearing for the better part of an hour. Shards of the missile flew violently in every direction, their momentum increased by the energy of the propellant explosion. Parts of the missile tore through the forest, tearing up Roanoke trees and spraying flames into the foliage. Other parts punctured structures in nearby homesteads, collapsing houses and barns and turning livestock into bloody patches streaked across the ground.

One portion of the missile's engine casing flung high in the air, arced down and plummeted toward a plot of earth, below which was the recently constructed shelter of the Gugino family. The casing's impact instantly collapsed the dirt above the shelter, driving it and the casing into the shelter proper. Inside was the entire Gugino family: Bruno and Natalie Gugino, their six-year-old twins Maria and Katherina, and their seventeen-year-old son Enzo. Who had recently begun courting Zoë once more, to some greater success than he had had before.

None of them would be coming out of that shelter.

An entire family gone in an instant. It was unspeakable.

It could have been so much worse.

I spent the hour after the attack collecting reports around the colony on the extent of the damage, and then headed to the Gugino homestead with Savitri. I found Zoë on the Gugino's porch, sitting listlessly amid the broken glass of the home's blown-out windows. Hickory stood beside her; Dickory was with Jane at the remains of the shelter. They were the only two at the shelter; a small group of men stood some distance away, awaiting Jane's orders.

I went to Zoë and gave her a fierce hug; she accepted it, but didn't return it. "Oh, sweetheart," I said. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm all right, Dad," she said, in a tone that made her words a lie.

"I know," I said, letting her go. "I'm still sorry. This is a hard thing. I'm not sure this is the best place for you to be right now."

"I don't want to leave," Zoë said.

"You don't have to," I said. "I just don't know if this is good for you to be seeing."

"I needed to be here," Zoë said. "I needed to see this for myself."

"All right," I said.

"I was supposed to be here tonight," Zoë said, and motioned back toward the house. "Enzo had invited me to dinner. I told him I would come, but then I lost track of time with Gretchen. I was going to call him to apologize when the warning came up. I was *supposed* to be here."

"Honey, you can't blame yourself for that," I said.

"I don't blame myself for it," Zoë said. "I'm *glad* I wasn't here. *That's* what I feel bad about."

I laughed a shaky laugh in spite of myself and gave Zoë another hug. "Oh God, Zoë," I said. "*I'm* glad you weren't here tonight, too. And I *don't* feel bad about that. I'm sorry for what happened to Enzo and his family. But I'm glad you were safe with us. Don't feel bad about being alive, sweetie." I kissed the top of her head.

"Thanks, Dad," Zoë said. She didn't seem entirely convinced.

"I'm going to have Savitri stay with you while I go talk to your mom, okay?" I said.

Zoë gave a small laugh. "What, you don't think Hickory is comforting enough?" she said.

"I'm sure he is," I said. "But I'm going to borrow him for a few minutes. All right?"

"Sure, Dad," Zoë said. Savitri went and sat on the steps with Zoë, drawing her into a hug. I motioned Hickory over to me. He matched my stride as we walked.

"You have your emotion implant on right now?" I asked.

"No," Hickory said. "Zoë's grief became too much."

"Turn it on, please," I said. "I find it easier to converse with you when it's on."

"As you wish," Hickory said, switched on its implant and then collapsed in a heap.

"What the hell?" I said, stopping.

"I'm sorry," Hickory said, righting itself. "I told you that Zoë's emotions were incredibly intense. I'm still working through them.

These were new emotions we haven't had with her before. New emotions are harder to process."

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"I am fine," Hickory said, standing. "I apologize."

"Forget it," I said. "Listen, have you been in contact with the other Obin yet?"

"We have," Hickory said. "Indirectly, through your satellite data feed. We have only reestablished contact and provided a digest of the events of last year. We have not offered a complete report."

"Why not?" I asked. We started walking again.

"Your data feed is not secure," Hickory said.

"You want to report things to your superiors without having the Colonial Union listening in," I said.

"Yes," Hickory said.

"What things?" I asked.

"Observations," Hickory said. "And suggestions."

"Some time ago you said to me that the Obin would be willing to help us if we needed help," I said. "Does that offer still stand?"

"It does, so far as I know," Hickory said. "Are you asking for our help, Major Perry?"

"Not yet," I said. "I just need to know what my options are."

Jane looked up at me as we came over. "I don't want Zoë over here," she said to me.

"It's that bad," I said.

"Worse," Jane said. "If you want my suggestion, it's to drag out this engine casing, fill this shelter all the way up with dirt and then put up a headstone. Trying to find enough to bury elsewhere is going to be an exercise in futility."

"Christ," I said. I nodded to the engine casing. "Do we know anything about this?"

Jane motioned toward Dickory, who was standing nearby. "Dickory says the markings say it's Nouri," she said.

"I don't know them," I said.

"The Colonial Union's had almost no contact with them," Jane said. "But it's probably not *from* them. They have a single planet and they don't colonize. There's no reason for them to attack us."

"Are they part of the Conclave?" I asked.

"No," Dickory said, coming closer. "But they sell weapons to some of the Conclave members."

"So this could be a Conclave attack," I said.

"It's possible," Dickory said.

"General Gau said that he wouldn't attack us," Jane said.

"He also said he didn't think he could stop others from attacking," I said.

"I don't think this *is* an attack," Jane said.

I motioned to the wreckage on the engine casing, which was still giving off heat. "This looks like an attack," I said.

"If it was an attack we'd all be dead," Jane said. "This was small and stupidly done to be a genuine attack on the colony. Whoever did this dropped the missiles directly above our colony, where our defense satellite could pick them off and send us information to kill the ones it couldn't. Stupid for attacking the colony. Not so stupid for testing our defenses."

"So if they actually managed to destroy the colony that would just have been a bonus," I said.

"Right," Jane said. "Now whoever it is that has done this knows what sort of defenses we use and what our capabilities are. And we know nothing about *them*, other than they're not stupid enough to mount an attack without knowing how we defend ourselves."

"It also means the next attack won't just be five missiles," I said.

"Probably not," Jane said.

I studied the wreckage. "We're sitting ducks," I said. "We nearly didn't knock *this* down, and some of our people are still dead. We need better defenses, now. The Colonial Union put a target on our chests, now it needs to help us to keep people from hitting it."

"I doubt a strongly worded letter is going to make a difference," Jane said.

"No," I agreed. "The *San Joaquin* is due here in a couple of days to drop supplies. One of us should be on it when it heads back to Phoenix Station. We'll be a lot harder to ignore if we're standing in someone's doorway."

"You have more faith than I do," Jane said.

"If we don't get traction there, we may have other options," I said, looking at Hickory. I started to say more but noticed Savitri and Zoë coming toward us. I broke off toward them, mindful of Jane's wish not to let Zoë get too close.

Savitri has out her PDA. "You've got some mail," she said.

"Jesus, Savitri," I said. "Now is really not the time. Forward it on to Jann." Since Roanoke had been officially rediscovered, Jane and I had been contacted by every possible media outlet known to man, begging, cajoling or demanding interviews. Five hundred such requests came in with the first official skip drone data packet Roanoke received. Neither Jane nor I had the time or inclination to deal with them, but we knew someone who had both, which is how Jann Kranjic officially became Roanoke's press secretary.

"I wouldn't bother you with a media request," Savitri said. "It's from the Department of Colonization. It's marked 'confidential' and 'extremely urgent.' "

"What is it about?" I asked.

"I don't know," Savitri said. "It won't let me open it." She handed the PDA over to me to show me that her access was blocked. I signed her out of the PDA and signed me in. A year's worth of going without a PDA made me realize both how much I relied on the thing before, and how little I wanted to rely on it now. I still didn't carry one with me, relying on Savitri to keep me in the loop.

The PDA accepted my biometrics and password and opened the letter.

"Fucking wonderful," I said, a minute later.

"Is everything all right?" Savitri said.

"Of course not," I said. "I need you to tell Jane to finish up here as soon as she can and meet me at the administration building the minute she's done. Then I want you to find Manfred Trujillo and Jann Kranjic and tell them to meet me there as well."

"All right," Savitri said. "What's happening? Can you tell me?"

I handed her back her PDA; she took it. "I've been relieved as colony leader," I said. "And I've been summoned to Phoenix Station."

"Well, you've only been temporarily relieved of your job, so that's a positive," Manfred Trujillo said, passing the PDA and its letter over to Jann Kranjic. The two of them, Jane, Savitri and Beata, who had accompanied Kranjic, were all jammed into my office, challenging its capacity to hold us all at once. "The fact it's temporary means that they haven't already decided to lynch you. They'll want to talk to you first before they make that decision."

"Looks like you might get my job after all, Manfred," I said, from behind my desk.

Trujillo glanced over at Jane, who was standing at the edge of the desk. "I think I would need to go through her first, and I'm not sure that's going to happen."

"I'm not going to stay in this job without John," Jane said.

"You're more than capable of doing the job," Trujillo said. "And no one would oppose you."

"I'm not questioning my competence," Jane said. "I just won't keep the job."

Trujillo nodded. "In any event, it's not clear they intend to remove you permanently," he said, pointing at the PDA, which was now in Beata's hands. "You're being hauled up in front of an inquiry. Speaking as a former legislator, I can tell you that the point of an inquiry is usually to cover someone's ass, not to actually inquire about something. And also speaking as a former legislator, I can tell you that the Department of Colonization has a lot of things to cover its ass about."

"But they still wouldn't recall you unless you did something they could point to," Kranjic said.

"Nice, Jann," Beata said. "We can always count on you for support."

"I'm not saying he *did* anything wrong, Beata," Kranjic snapped. Kranjic had rehired Beata as his assistant after he was made the colony's press secretary, but it was clear their personal relationship had not vastly improved post-divorce. "I'm saying he did something that they can use as an excuse to pin something *on* him, to get him in front of an inquiry."

"And you did, didn't you?" Trujillo asked me. "When you were with General Gau, you offered him a way out. You told him not to call

his fleet. You weren't supposed to do that."

"No, I wasn't," I said.

"I find it a little confusing myself," Trujillo said.

"I needed to be able to say I made the offer," I said. "For my own conscience."

"The moral issues aside," Trujillo said, "if someone wanted to get fussy about it, they could accuse you of treason. The Colonial Union's plan required getting the Conclave fleet here. You intentionally put their strategy at risk."

I turned to Kranjic. "You're talking to other journalists," I said. "Are you hearing anything about this?"

"About you being floated as a traitor? No," Kranjic said. "There are still a lot of journalists who want to talk to either you or Jane, but it's all about the night the Conclave fleet went down or how we've survived here. I've turned a lot of these journalists over to Manfred and the other council members. Maybe they've heard something along that line."

I turned to Trujillo. "Well?" I asked.

"Nothing like that on this end, either," Trujillo said. "But you know as well as anyone that most of what the Colonial Union is planning or thinking isn't ever discussed outside of its own halls."

"So they're going to pin you as a traitor because you weren't hopping up and down to kill a couple hundred thousand intelligent beings," Savitri said. "I'm suddenly reminded why I loathe the Colonial Union power structure."

"It might not just be that," Jane said. "John may be being made a scapegoat, but if that's true then it begs the question of what he's being made a scapegoat *for*. Alternately, if his behavior with Gau is being examined, the Colonial Union is looking at how his behavior affected events."

"You think something didn't go according to plan," I said to Jane.

"I think you don't look for scapegoats when your plans go off without a hitch," Jane said. "If the Conclave is behind tonight's attack, it suggests that it's gotten itself reorganized more quickly than the CU expected."

I looked back over to Kranjic, who picked up the meaning of my glance. "There's nothing in the media reports I've seen about the Conclave, positive or negative," he said.

"That doesn't make any sense," I said. General Rybicki had told me that part of the plan was to introduce the Conclave to the colonies in its great moment of defeat. Now they had the moment of defeat; it should be all over the media. "There's nothing about the Conclave at all?"

"Nothing by name," Kranjic said. "The media reports I've seen mention that the Colonial Union discovered the colony had been threatened by a number of alien races, which made the CU pull its deception. They also mention the battle here. But none of it has the Conclave described as *the Conclave*."

"But we know about the Conclave," Savitri said. "Everyone here knows about the Conclave. When our people send letters or video back to family and friends, they're going to talk about it. It's not going to remain a secret for long. Especially after tonight."

"There are lots of ways for the CU to spin that if they want to," Beata said, to Savitri. "We don't know who attacked us tonight. It could be any number of races, and there's nothing in the attack to suggest an alliance of races. If the Colonial Union wants to minimize the idea of the Conclave, it could just tell the media it intentionally fed us bad information for our own protection. We'd be more willing to look after our own safety if we thought the entire universe was out to get us."

Savitri pointed to me. "And his encounter with General Gau was just some sort of delusion?" she asked.

"He's being recalled," Beata said. "It's entirely possible his inquiry is going to be him being told to revise his memory of the incident."

"I didn't realize you were this conspiracy-obsessed," Savitri said to Beata.

"Welcome to me," Beata said.

"It's possible journalists and others *do* know about the Conclave," Kranjic said. "It's just not making it through the official media channels. And if the CU is actively discouraging journalists from talking about it, then they're not likely to discuss it with us—"

"—because all our communication comes via skip drone," Jane finished. "Which means it's monitored by the Colonial Union."

"Right," Kranjic said.

I remembered Hickory's concern about the CU listening in to its communication with other Obin. Apparently it wasn't the only one suspicious of the CU. "Don't you guys have code or something?" I asked Kranjic. "Some way to let other journalists know something even if you're being monitored?"

"You want me to write 'The hawk flies at midnight'?" Kranjic asked. "No, we don't have a code, and even if we did, no one would risk it. You don't think the CU looks for semantic idiosyncrasies and steganographic patterns?" He pointed to Jane. "Rumor had it she did intelligence for the CDF at one time. Ask her about it."

"So not only do we not know what the CU knows, we *can't* know what the CU knows," Savitri said. "We might as well still be lost."

"No," I said. "We can know. We just can't know from *here*."

"Ah," Trujillo said. "Your trip to Phoenix Station. You think you can find out more there."

"Yes," I said.

"You'll be busy with your inquiry," Trujillo said. "You're not going to have a lot of time to catch up on gossip."

"You still know people in the Colonial Union government," I said to Trujillo.

"Unless there's been a coup, yes," Trujillio said. "It's only been a year. I can get you in contact with a few people."

"I'd rather you came with me," I said. "As you said, I'm going to be busy with an inquiry. And your people will talk to you more candidly than they will talk to me. Especially considering what you thought of me the last time any of them talked to you." I looked over to Kranjic. "You, too, Jann. You still know people in the media."

Beata snorted. "He knows talking heads," she said. "Let me come. I know the producers and the editors—the people who feed people like him their lines."

"Both of you come," I said, before Kranjic could get off a shot at Beata. "We need to find out as much as we can from as many different

sources as we can. Manfred in the government. You two with your media contacts. Jane with Special Forces."

"No," Jane said. "I'm staying here."

I stopped, more than a little surprised at this. "Special Forces carried out the attack on the Conclave Fleet," I said. "They probably know more than anyone about what the aftereffects are. I need you to find out, Jane."

"No," Jane said.

"John," Savitri said, "we've been attacked. Someone actually has to run the colony while you're away. Jane needs to be here."

There was more to it than that, but Jane's stare was flat and expressionless. Whatever it was that was going on, I wasn't going to find out about it right then. And Savitri was right in any event. "Fine," I said. "I still have a few people I can talk to as well. Unless they're planning to hold me in a cell."

"You don't think anyone will question why the three of us will be coming along with you," Trujillo said.

"I don't think so," I said. "We've been attacked. I'm going to be engaged in my inquiry. Manfred, you're going to have to stand in people's doorways and try to get the CU to increase our defenses, and fast. Beata will present herself as our cultural minister; in addition to talking to her contacts she's going to try to get permissions for entertainment and educational programming. We have the capability for that now. And as press secretary, Jann's going to be busy shopping around the story of Roanoke's first year. You all have your own reasons for going. Makes sense?"

"Makes sense," Trujillo agreed. Kranjic and Beata nodded as well.

"Good," I said. "Our ship is due here in two days, then." I stood up to end the meeting. I reached over to Jane to catch her before she left, but she was the first one out the door.

"Where's Zoë?" I asked Jane, when I came back home.

"She's over at Trujillo's," Jane said. She was sitting in her chair on the porch, petting Babar. "She and Gretchen and all of their friends are mourning Enzo. She'll probably stay the night there."

"How was she doing?" I asked.

"Someone she loved died," Jane said. "It's hard for anyone. She's lost loved ones before. But this was the first time it was one of her contemporaries. One of her friends."

"And a first love at that," I said. "That complicates matters."

"It does," Jane said. "Everything's complicated now."

"Speaking of which, I wanted to ask you what that was about back there," I said. "You turning down going to Phoenix Station."

"Savitri said it," Jane said. "It's bad enough the colony is losing you to an inquiry, and that you're taking Trujillo with you. Someone needs to be here."

"But that's not all of it," I said. "I know you well enough to know when you're holding something back."

"I don't want to be responsible for compromising the safety of the colony," Jane said.

"How would you do that?" I said.

"For one thing, the next time I see General Szilard, I'm going to break the bastard's neck," Jane said. "They're not likely to keep me on after that. Then there would be no leadership for this colony at all."

"You were always the practical one," I said.

"It's who I am," Jane agreed. "Something I got from Kathy, perhaps."

"Perhaps," I said. It was rare that Jane would talk directly about Kathy; it's hard to talk to your husband about his first wife, especially when you are made from that wife's DNA. When Jane brought up Kathy, it was an indication that other things were on her mind. I kept quiet until she was ready to tell me what was going on in her head.

"I dream about her sometimes," Jane finally said. "About Kathy."

"What do you dream about her?" I asked.

"That she and I talk," Jane said. "And she tells me how you were when you were with her, and I tell her how you are with me. And we talk about our families and our lives and about each other. And when I wake up I don't remember anything specific about what we've talked about. Just that we've talked."

"That must be frustrating," I said.

"It's not," Jane said. "Not really. I like that we just talk. I like feeling that connection with her. She's part of who I am. Mother and sister and self. All of it. I like that she visits me. I know it's just a dream. It's still nice."

"I bet it is," I said, remembering Kathy, who Jane was so much like, even as much as she was her own person.

"I'd like to visit her one day," Jane said.

"I'm not sure how we'd do that," I said. "She's been gone a long time."

"No," Jane said. "I mean I'd like to visit where she is now. Where she's buried."

"I'm not sure how we'd do that, either," I said. "Once we leave Earth, we're not allowed to go back."

"I never left Earth," Jane said, looking down at Babar, who thumped a lazy, happy beat with his tail. "Only my DNA did."

"I don't think the Colonial Union will make the distinction," I said, smiling at one of Jane's rare jokes.

"I know they won't," Jane said, a trace of bitterness in her voice. "Earth is too valuable as a factory to risk it being infected by the rest of the universe." She looked over at me. "Don't you ever want to go back? You spent most of your life there."

"I did," I said. "But I left because there was nothing keeping me there. My wife was dead and our kid grew up. It wasn't too hard to say good-bye. And now what I care about is here. This is my world now."

"Is it?" Jane said. She looked up at the stars. "I remember standing in the road back on Huckleberry, wondering if I could make another world my home. Make *this* world my home."

"Can you?" I asked.

"Not yet," Jane said. "Everything about this world *shifts*. Every reason we've thought we had for being here has turned out to be a half-truth. I care about Roanoke. I care about the people here. I will fight for them and I'll defend Roanoke the best that I can, when it comes to that. But this isn't my world. I don't *trust* it. Do you?"

"I don't know," I said. "I know that I'm worried this inquiry will take it away from me, though."

“Do you think anyone here cares anymore about who the Colonial Union thinks should run this colony?” Jane asked.

“Possibly not,” I said. “But it would still hurt.”

“Hmmm,” Jane said, and thought about that for a while. “I still want to see Kathy one day,” she eventually said.

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said.

“Don’t say that unless you mean it,” Jane said.

“I mean it,” I said, and was somewhat surprised that, in fact, I did. “I would like you to meet her. I wish you could have met her before.”

“So do I,” Jane said.

“It’s settled, then,” I said. “Now all we have to do is find a way to get back to Earth without getting our ship shot out from under us by the CU. I’ll have to work on that.”

“Do that,” Jane said. “But later.” She stood and held out her hand to me. I took it. We went inside.

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TWELVE

"Our apologies, Administrator Perrry, for the late start," said Justine Butcher, Assistant Deputy Secretary for Colonial Jurisprudence for the Department of Colonization. "As you may be aware, things have been quite hectic around here recently."

I was aware. When Trujillo, Kranjic, Beata and I disembarked the shuttle from our transport ship to Phoenix Station, the general station buzz appeared to have trebled; none of us had ever recalled seeing the station as jam-packed with CDF soldiers and CU functionaries as it appeared to be now. Whatever was going on, it was big. All of us glanced at each other significantly, because whatever it was, it almost certainly involved us and Roanoke in some way. We fanned out from each other wordlessly, off to our own individual tasks.

"Of course," I said. "Anything in particular causing the rush?"

"It's a number of things, happening at once," Butcher said. "None of which you need to concern yourself with at the moment."

"I see," I said. "Very well."

Butcher nodded, and signified the two other people seated at the table, before which I stood. "This inquiry has been impaneled in order to question you about your conversation with General Tarsem Gau of the Conclave," Butcher said. "This is a formal inquiry, which means that you are required to answer any and all questions truthfully, directly and completely as possible. However, this is not a trial. You have not been charged with any crime. If at a future point you are

charged with a crime, you will be tried through the Department of Colonization's Court of Colonial Affairs. Do you understand?"

"I do," I said. The DoC's Colonial Affairs Courts were judge-only affairs, designed to let colony heads and their appointed judges make quick decisions so the colonists could get on with colonizing. A CA Court ruling had the force of law, although limited to that specific case only. A CA Court judge or colony head acting as judge could not circumvent Department of Colonization regulations and bylaws, but as the DoC recognized the wide range of colonial situations were not uniform in their regulatory needs, those regulations and bylaws were surprisingly few. Colonial Affairs Courts were also organizationally flat; there was no appealing a Colonial Affairs Court ruling. Essentially a CA Court judge could do whatever he or she wanted. It was not an optimal legal situation for a defendant.

"Fine," Butcher said, and looked at her PDA. "Then let's begin. When you were conversing with General Gau, you offered first to take his surrender, and then offered to allow him to leave Roanoke space without injury to himself or to his fleet." She looked up at me over the PDA. "This is correct, Administrator?"

"That's right," I said.

"General Rybicki, whom we have already called"—this was news to me, and I was suddenly sure that Rybicki was now less than entirely pleased he ever suggested me for the colonial administrator position—"testified to us that your orders were to engage Gau in nonessential discussions only, until the fleet was destroyed, at which point you were to inform him that only his ship had survived the attack."

"Yes," I said.

"Very well," Butcher said. "Then you may begin by explaining what you were thinking when you offered to accept Gau's surrender, and then offered to let his fleet go unharmed."

"I suppose I was hoping to avoid bloodshed," I said.

"It's not your place to make that call," said Colonel Bryan Berkeley, who represented the Colonial Defense Forces at the inquiry.

"I disagree," I said. "My colony was potentially under attack. I am the colony leader. My job is to keep my colony safe."

"The attack wiped out the Conclave fleet," Berkeley said. "Your colony was never in danger."

"The attack could have failed," I said. "No offense to the CDF or to the Special Forces, Colonel, but not every attack they plan succeeds. I was at Coral, where the CDF's plans failed miserably and a hundred thousand of our people died."

"Are you saying you expected us to fail?" Berkeley asked.

"I'm saying I have an appreciation for the fact that plans are plans," I said. "And that I had an obligation to my colony."

"Did you *expect* that General Gau would surrender to you?" asked the third questioner. I took a moment to take him in: General Laurence Szilard, head of the CDF Special Forces.

His presence on the panel made me extremely nervous. There was absolutely no reason why he of all people should be on it. He was several layers of bureaucracy more advanced than either Butcher or Berkeley; having him sitting placidly on the panel—and not even being the panel chairman—was like having your kid's day care supervisor be Dean of the College at Harvard University. It didn't make any sort of sense. If he decided that I needed to be squashed for messing up a mission the Special Forces supervised, it really wouldn't matter what either of the other two panelists thought about anything; I'd be dead meat on a stick. The knowledge made me queasy.

That said, I was also deeply curious about the man. Here was the general whose neck my wife wished to wring because he altered her back into a Special Forces soldier without her permission and also, I suspected, without much remorse. Some part of me wondered if I shouldn't attempt to wring his neck out of a sense of chivalry for my wife. Considering that as a Special Forces soldier he would probably have kicked my ass even when I was a genetically-enhanced soldier, I doubted I could do much against him now that I was once again a mere mortal. Jane probably wouldn't appreciate me getting my own neck wrung.

Szilard waited for my answer, his expression placid.

"I had no reason to suspect he would surrender, no," I said.

"But you asked him to anyway," Szilard said. "Ostensibly to allow your colony to survive. I find it interesting that you asked for his

surrender rather than begging for him to spare your colony. If you were simply looking to him to spare the colony and the lives of the colonists, wouldn't that have been the more prudent course? The information the Colonial Union provided you about the general gave you no reason to believe surrender would be something he'd entertain."

Careful, some part of my brain whispered. The way Szilard had phrased his comment seemed to suggest that he thought I might have had information from other sources. Which I had, but it seemed impossible that he would know that. If he did and I lied, I would be deeply into a world of shit. Decisions, decisions.

"I knew of our planned attack," I said. "Perhaps that made me overconfident."

"So you admit that what you said to General Gau could have indicated to him that our attack was imminent," Berkeley said.

"I doubt that he saw anything more in it than the bravado of a colony leader, trying to save his own people," I said.

"Nevertheless, you can see how, from the perspective of the Colonial Union, your actions could have jeopardized the mission and the safety not only of your colony but of the Colonial Union," Butcher said.

"My actions could be interpreted any number of ways," I said. "I can't give credence to any other interpretation aside from my own. My interpretation is that I was doing what I thought was necessary to protect my colony and my colonists."

"In your conversation with General Gau you admit that you shouldn't have made him the offer to withdraw his fleet," Berekely said. "You knew that what you were offering the general was contrary to our wishes, which implies rather strongly that we had made our wishes known to you. If the general had had the presence of mind to follow your line of reasoning, the attack would have been obvious."

I paused. This was getting ridiculous. It wasn't to say that I wasn't expecting a railroading in this inquiry, just that I had expected it to be a little more subtle than this. But I suppose Butcher had noted that things were hectic and rushed recently; I don't know why my inquiry would be any different. "I don't know what to say to that line of reasoning," I said. "I did what I thought was the right thing for me to do."

Butcher and Berkeley gave each other a quick sidelong glance. They had gotten what they wanted out of the inquiry; as far as they were concerned the inquiry was over. I focused on my shoes.

"What do you think of General Gau?"

I looked up, entirely surprised. General Szilard sat there, once again blandly awaiting my answer. Butcher and Berkeley also looked surprised; whatever Szilard was doing, it was apparently off the script.

"I'm not sure I understand the question," I said.

"Sure you do," Szilard said. "You spent a reasonable amount of time with General Gau, and I'm sure you have had time to reflect and speculate on the nature of the general, both before and after the destruction of the Conclave fleet. Given your knowledge of him, what do you think of him?"

Oh, fuck, I thought. There was no doubt in my mind that Szilard knew I knew more about General Gau and the Conclave than the information the Colonial Union gave me. How he knew that was a matter I could table for now. The question was how to answer the question.

You're already screwed, I thought. Butcher and Berkeley were already clearly planning to punt me to Colonial Affairs Court, where my trial on whatever charge (I was assuming incompetence, although dereliction of duty was not out of the question, and for that matter, neither was treason) would be short and not especially sweet. I had been working under the assumption that Szilard's presence was his way of making sure he got a result he wanted—he couldn't have been pleased at the idea of me potentially messing with his mission—but now I wasn't at all sure. Suddenly I hadn't the first damn clue what Szilard really wanted from this inquiry. Only that no matter what I said here, I was already done for.

Well, it was an official inquiry. That meant it was going into the Colonial Union archives. So what the hell.

"I think he's an honorable man," I said.

"Excuse me?" Berkeley said.

"I said, I think he's an honorable man," I repeated. "He didn't simply attempt to destroy Roanoke, for one thing. He offered to spare my colonists or allow them to join the Conclave. None of the

information the Colonial Union gave me indicated that these were options. In information I got—that all the colonists at Roanoke got, through me—was that Gau and the Conclave were simply wiping out the colonies that they discovered. It's why we kept our heads down for an entire year."

"Simply saying to you that he was going to allow your colonists to surrender doesn't mean that he would do any such thing," Berkeley said. "Surely as a former CDF commander you understand the value of disinformation, and providing such to your enemy."

"I don't think Roanoke colony would have qualified as an enemy," I said. "There are fewer than three thousand of us against four hundred twelve capital ships. There were no defenses we could bring to bear, no possible military advantage in securing our surrender simply to destroy us. That would have been profoundly cruel."

"You're not aware of the psychological value of cruelty in warfare?" Berkeley said.

"I'm aware of it," I said. "I wasn't aware from the information the Colonial Union gave me that it was part of the general's personal psychological profile or of his military tactics."

"There's much you don't know of the general," Butcher said.

"I agree," I said. "Which is why I chose to go with my own intuition of his character. But I seem to recall that the general noted that he had overseen three dozen of these colony removals before he got to Roanoke. If you have information about those incidents and how the general acted toward those colonies, that would be instructive regarding his honor and his position on cruelty. Do you have that information?"

"We have it," Butcher said. "We are not at liberty to provide it to you, as you've been temporarily removed from your administrative position."

"I understand," I said. "Did you have any of this information *before* I was stripped of my administrative status?"

"Are you implying that the Colonial Union withheld information from you?" Berkeley asked.

"I'm not implying a thing," I said. "I was asking a question. And my point was that in the absence of information provided to me by the

Colonial Union, I have only my own judgment to guide me, to complement the information I have." I looked directly at Szilard. "In my judgment, from what *I* know of the man, General Gau is honorable."

Szilard considered this. "What would you have done, Administrator Perry, if Gau had appeared in your sky before the Colonial Union had its attack plan finalized?"

"Are you asking if I would have surrendered the colony?" I asked.

"I'm asking what you would have done," Szilard said.

"I would have taken advantage of Gau's offer," I said. "I would have let him take the Roanoke colonists back to the Colonial Union."

"So you *would* have surrendered the colony," Butcher said.

"No," I said. "I would have stayed behind to defend Roanoke. I suspect my wife would stay with me. Anyone else who wished to stay could stay." *With the exception of Zoë*, I thought, although I didn't like the scene of Zoë being dragged, kicking and screaming, to a transport by Hickory and Dickory.

"That's a distinction without a difference," Berkeley said. "There's no colony without colonists."

"I agree," I said. "But one colonist is enough for the colony to stand, and one colonist is enough to die for the Colonial Union. My responsibility is to my colony *and* to my colonists. I would refuse to surrender the colony of Roanoke. I would also do everything in my power to keep the colonists alive. From a practical point of view, twenty-five hundred colonists are no more able to stand up to an entire fleet of warships than a single colonist would be. My death would be sufficient to make the point the CU would wish for me to make. If you think I would force every *other* Roanoke colonist to die to satisfy some arcane accounting of what defines the destruction of a colony, Colonel Berkeley, then you're a goddamned fool."

Berkeley looked as if he were ready to come over the table at me. Szilard sat there with the same damned inscrutable look he'd had through the entire inquiry.

"Well," Butcher said, trying to get the inquiry back under control. "I think we've gotten everything we need from you, Administrator Perry. You are free to go and to await the resolution of our inquiry. You

will not be allowed to leave Phoenix Station prior to the resolution. Do you understand?"

"I understand," I said. "Do I need to find some sort of lodging?"

"I don't expect it will take that long," Butcher said.

"Understand that everything I've heard is off the record," Trujillo said.

"At this point, I don't know that I would trust information that is *on* the record," I said.

Trujillo nodded. "Amen to that," he said.

"What have you heard?" I said.

"It's bad," he said. "And it's getting worse."

Trujillo, Kranjic, Beata and I sat in my favorite commissary at Phoenix, the one with the truly spectacular burgers. We had all ordered one; the burgers cooled, neglected, as we talked in as secluded a corner as we could find.

"Define *bad*," I said.

"There was a missile attack on Phoenix the other night," Trujillo said.

"That's not bad, that's stupid," I said. "Phoenix has the most advanced planetary defense grid of any of the human planets. You couldn't get a missile larger than a marble past it."

"Right," Trujillo said. "And everyone knows it. There hasn't been an attack of *any* size against Phoenix in over a hundred years. The attack wasn't meant to be successful. It was meant to send a message that no human planet should be considered safe from retaliation. That's a pretty big statement."

I thought about this while I took a bite of my burger. "Presumably Phoenix wasn't the only planet to get a missile attack," I said.

"No," Trujillo said. "My people tell me that all the colonies have been attacked."

I nearly choked. "All of them," I repeated.

"*All* of them," Trujillo said. "The established colonies were never in any danger; their planetary defense grids picked off the attacks. Some of the smaller colonies saw some damage. Sedona colony had an entire settlement wiped off the map. Ten thousand people dead."

"You're sure about that," I said.

"Secondhand," Trujillo said. "But from a source I trust, who spoke to the Sedonan representative. I trust my source as much as I trust anyone."

I turned to Kranjic and Beata. "This fits in with what you've heard?"

"It does," Kranjic said. "Manfred and I have different sources, but what I'm hearing is the same." Beata nodded as well.

"But none of this is on the news feeds," I said, glancing down at my PDA, which lay on the table. I had it open and active, awaiting the determination of the inquiry.

"No," Trujillo said. "The Colonial Union has slapped a blanket prohibition on information about the attacks. They're using the State Secrecy Act. You'll remember that one."

"Yeah," I winced at the memory of the werewolves and Gutierrez. "Didn't do me a whole lot of good. I doubt it'll do the CU much better."

"The attacks explain the chaos we're seeing here," Trujillo said. "I don't have any sources from the CDF—they're clammed up tight—but I know that every single colony representative is screaming their head off for direct CDF protection. Ships are being recalled and reassigned, but there's not enough for every colony. From what I hear, the CDF is doing triage—deciding which colonies it can protect and which colonies it can afford to lose."

"Where does Roanoke fit into that triage?" I asked.

Trujillo shrugged. "When it comes down to it, everyone wants defense priority," he said. "I sounded out the legislators I know about increasing Roanoke's defenses. They all said they'd be happy to—once their own planets were taken care of."

"No one's talking about Roanoke anymore," Beata said. "Everyone is focused on what's happening at their own homes. They can't report it, but they're sure as hell following it."

We focused on our burgers after that, lost in our own thoughts. I was preoccupied enough that I didn't notice someone standing behind me until Trujillo looked up and stopped chewing. "Perry," he said, and glanced meaningfully over my shoulder. I turned to see General Szilard.

"I like the burgers here, too," he said. "I'd join you, but given your wife's experience, I doubt you'd be willing to eat at the same table as me."

"Now that you mention it, General," I said, "you'd be entirely correct about that."

"Then walk with me please, Administrator Perry," Szilard said. "We have a lot to discuss, and time is short."

"All right," I said. I picked up my tray, giving a glance over at my lunch mates. Their expressions were carefully blank. I dropped the contents of my tray into the nearest receptacle and faced the general. "Where to?" I asked.

"Come on," Szilard said. "Let's go for a ride."

"There," Szilard said. His personal shuttle hung in space, with Phoenix visible to port and Phoenix Station off to starboard. He motioned to indicate both. "Nice view, isn't it?"

"Very nice," I said, wondering why the hell Szilard had taken me here. Some paranoid part of me wondered if he were planning to pop the shuttle's access hatch and toss me into space, but he didn't have a space suit, so this seemed somewhat unlikely. Then again, he was Special Forces. Maybe he didn't need a space suit.

"I'm not planning to kill you," Szilard said.

I smiled in spite of myself. "Apparently you can read minds," I said.

"Not yours," Szilard said. "But I can guess what you're thinking well enough. Relax. I'm not going to kill you, if for no other reason because then Sagan would track me down and kill *me*."

"You're already on her shit list," I said.

"Of that I have no doubt," Szilard said. "But it was necessary, and I don't plan to apologize for it."

"General," I said, "why are we here?"

"We're here because I like the view, and because I want to speak frankly to you, and because this shuttle is the one place I'm entirely sure where anything I say to you is not going to be overheard by anyone else in any way." The general reached over to the control dash

of the shuttle and pressed a button; the view of Phoenix and Phoenix Station disappeared and was replaced with a depthless black.

"Nanomesh," I said.

"Indeed," Szilard said. "No signals in, no signals out. You should know that being cut off is unspeakably claustrophobic for Special Forces; we're so used to being in constant contact with each other through our BrainPals that dropping the signal is like losing any three of our senses."

"I knew that," I said. Jane had recounted to me the mission in which she and other Special Forces hunted Charles Boutin; Boutin had devised a way to cut off the BrainPal signal of the Special Forces, killing most of them and driving some of those who survived completely insane.

Szilard nodded. "Then you'll understand how difficult something like this is, even for me. Honestly I have no idea how Sagan was able leave it behind when she married you."

"There are other ways to connect with someone," I said.

"If you say so," Szilard said. "The fact I'm willing to do this should also communicate to you the seriousness of what I'm going to say to you."

"All right," I said. "I'm ready."

"Roanoke is in serious trouble," Szilard said. "We all are. The Colonial Union had anticipated that destroying the Conclave fleet would throw the Conclave into a civil war. That much was correct. Right now the Conclave is tearing itself apart. The races loyal to General Gau are squaring off against another faction who has found a leader in a member of the Arris race named Nerbros Eser. As it stands there's only one thing that has kept these two factions of the Conclave from destroying each other entirely."

"What's that?" I said.

"The thing the Colonial Union *didn't* anticipate," Szilard said. "And that is that every single member race of the Conclave is now bent on destroying the Colonial Union. Not just containing the Colonial Union, as General Gau was content to do. They want to eradicate it completely."

"Because we wiped out the fleet," I said.

"That's the proximate cause," Szilard said. "The Colonial Union forgot that in attacking the fleet we weren't only striking at the Conclave but at every member of the Conclave. The ships in the fleet were often the flagships for their races. We didn't just destroy a fleet, we destroyed racial symbols. We kicked every single member race of the Conclave hard and square in the balls, Perry. They're not going to forgive that. But beyond that we're trying to use the destruction of the Conclave fleet as a rallying point for other unaffiliated races. We're trying to get them to become our allies. And the Conclave members have decided that the best way to keep those races unaffiliated is to make an example out of the Colonial Union. All of it."

"You don't sound surprised," I said.

"I'm not," Szilard said. "When destroying the Conclave fleet was first considered, I had the Special Forces intelligence corps model out the consequences of that act. This was always the most likely result."

"Why didn't they listen?" I asked.

"Because the CDF models told the Colonial Union what it wanted to hear," Szilard said. "And because at the end of the day the Colonial Union is going to place more weight on the intelligence generated by real humans than the intelligence created by the Frankenstein monsters it creates to do its dirty work."

"Like destroy the Conclave fleet," I said, recalling Lieutenant Stross.

"Yes," Szilard said.

"If you believed this was going to be the result, you should have refused to do it," I said. "You shouldn't have let your soldiers destroy the fleet."

Szilard shook his head. "It's not that simple. If I were to have refused, I would have been replaced as the commander of Special Forces. Special Forces are no less ambitious and venal than any other sort of human being, Perry. I can think of three generals under me who would have been happy to take my job for the simple cost of following foolish orders."

"But you followed foolish orders," I said.

"I did," Szilard said. "But I did so under my own terms. Part of which was helping to install you and Sagan as colony leaders at

Roanoke."

"*You* installed me," I said. This was news to me.

"Well, actually, I installed Sagan," Szilard said. "You were merely part of the package deal. It was acceptable because you seemed unlikely to fuck things up."

"Nice to be valued," I said.

"You did make it easier to suggest Sagan," Szilard said. "I knew you had a history with General Rybicki. In all, you came in handy. But in point of fact neither you nor Sagan was the key to the equation. It was your daughter, Administrator Perry, who really matters here. Your daughter was the reason I chose the two of you to lead Roanoke."

I tried to puzzle this one out. "Because of the Obin?" I asked.

"Because of the Obin," Szilard agreed. "Because of the fact the Obin consider her something only a little short of a living god, thanks to their devotion to her true father, and the debatably beneficial boon of consciousness that he gave them."

"I'm afraid that I don't understand how the Obin matter here," I said, although that was a lie. I knew precisely, but I wanted to hear it from Szilard.

He obliged. "Because Roanoke is doomed without them," he said. "Roanoke has served its primary purpose of being a trap for the Conclave fleet. Now the entire Colonial Union is under attack and the CU will have to decide how best to portion out its defensive resources."

"We're already aware Roanoke doesn't rate much of a defense," I said. "I and my staff have had our face rubbed in that fact today."

"Oh, no," Szilard said. "It's worse than that."

"How can it be worse?" I asked.

"This way: Roanoke is more valuable to the Colonial Union dead than alive," Szilard said. "You have to understand, Perry. The Colonial Union is about to fight for its life against most of the races we know of. Its nice little system of farming decrepit Earthlings for soldiers isn't going to get the job done anymore. It's going to need to raise troops from the worlds of the Colonial Union, and fast. This is where Roanoke comes in. Alive, Roanoke is just another colony. Dead, it's a symbol for the ten worlds who gave it colonists, and to all the rest of

the worlds in the Colonial Union. When Roanoke dies, the citizens of the Colonial Union are going to demand that they be allowed to fight. And the Colonial Union will let them."

"You know this for sure," I said. "This has been discussed."

"Of course it hasn't," Szilard said. "It never will be. But it's what will happen. The Colonial Union knows that Roanoke is a symbol for the Conclave races as well, the site of their first defeat. It's inevitable that defeat will be revenged. The Colonial Union also knows that by not defending Roanoke, that revenge will happen sooner than later. And sooner will work better for what the Colonial Union needs."

"I don't understand," I said. "You're saying that in order to fight the Conclave, the Colonial Union needs its citizens to become soldiers. And to motivate them into volunteering, Roanoke needs to be destroyed. But you're telling me that the reason you chose Jane and I to lead Roanoke was because the Obin revere my daughter and would not allow the colony to be destroyed."

"It's not quite that simple," Szilard said. "The Obin would not allow your daughter to die, that much is true. They may or may not defend your colony. But the Obin offered you another advantage: knowledge."

"You've lost me again," I said.

"Stop playing the fool, Perry," Szilard said. "It's insulting. I know you know more about General Gau and the Conclave than you let on in that sham of an inquiry today. I know it because it was the Special Forces who prepared the dossier on General Gau and the Conclave for you, the one that rather sloppily left a tremendous amount of metadata in its files for you to find. I also know that your daughter's Obin bodyguards knew rather more about the Conclave than we could tell you in our dossier. That's how you knew you could trust General Gau at his word. And that's why you tried to convince him not to call his fleet. You knew it would be destroyed and you knew he would be compromised."

"You couldn't have known I'd look for that metadata," I said. "You were risking a lot on my curiosity."

"Not really," Szilard said. "Remember, *you* were largely incidental to the selection process. I left that information for Sagan to find. She

was an intelligence officer for years. She would have looked for metadata in the files as a matter of course. The fact you found the information first is trivial. It would have been found. It does me no good to leave things to chance."

"But none of that information does me any good *now*," I said. "None of this changes the fact that Roanoke is in the crosshairs, and there's not a thing *I* can do about it. You were at the inquiry. I'll be lucky if they let me tell Jane what prison I'll be rotting in."

Szilard waved this off. "The inquiry determined that you acted responsibly and within your duties," he said. "You're free to return to Roanoke as soon as you and I are done here."

"I take it back," I said. "You *weren't* at the same inquiry I was at."

"It is true that both Butcher and Berkeley are entirely convinced you're absolutely incompetent," Szilard said. "Both of them initially voted to move you to the Colonial Affairs Court, where you would have been convicted and sentenced in about five minutes. However, I managed to convince them to switch their vote."

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"Let's just say that it never pays to have things you don't want other people to know," Szilard said.

"You're blackmailing them," I said.

"I made them aware that every action has a consequence," Szilard said. "And in the fullness of their consideration they preferred the consequences of allowing you to return to Roanoke as opposed to the consequences of keeping you here. Ultimately it was all the same to them. They think you're going to die if you go back to Roanoke."

"I don't know that I blame them," I said.

"You could very well die," Szilard said. "But as I said, you have certain advantages. One of them is your relationship to the Obin. Another is your wife. Between them you might manage to help Roanoke survive, and you with it."

"But we're back to the problem," I said. "The way you tell it, the Colonial Union needs Roanoke to die. By helping me to save Roanoke, you're working against the Colonial Union, General. You're a traitor."

"That's my problem, not yours," Szilard said. "I'm not worried about being branded a traitor. I'm worried about what happens if

Roanoke falls."

"If Roanoke falls, the Colonial Union gets its soldiers," I said.

"And then it will go to war with most of the races in this part of space," Szilard said. "And it will *lose*. And in losing, humanity will be wiped out. All of it, from Roanoke all the way up. Even Earth will die, Perry. It will be wiped out and the billions there will have no idea why they're dying. Nothing will be saved. Humanity is on the brink of genocide. And it's a genocide we will have inflicted on ourselves. Unless you can stop it. Unless you can save Roanoke."

"I don't know if I can do that," I said. "Just before I came here, Roanoke was attacked. Just five missiles, but it took everything we had to keep them from wiping us out. If a whole group of Conclave races wants to grind us into dirt I don't know how we can stop them."

"You need to find a way," Szilard said.

"You're a general," I said. "You do it."

"I *am* doing it," Szilard said. "By giving the responsibility to you. I can't do any more than that without losing my place in the Colonial Union hierarchy. And then I *would* be powerless. I've been doing what I can since this insane plan to attack the Conclave was formed. I used you as long as I could without letting you know, but we're beyond that now. Now you know. It's your job to save humanity, Perry."

"No pressure there," I said.

"You did it for years," Szilard said. "Don't you remember what they told you the job of Colonial Defense Forces was? 'To keep a place for humanity among the stars.' You did it then. You need to do it now."

"Then it was me and every other member of the CDF," I said. "The responsibility is a little more focused now."

"Then let me help," Szilard said. "Again, and for the last time. My intelligence corps has told me that General Gau is going to be assassinated by a member of his own circle of advisers. Someone he trusts; indeed, someone he loves. This assassination will happen within the month. We have no other information. We have no way of informing General Gau of the assassination attempt, and even if we had a way, there's no way we could inform him, and no chance he would accept the information as genuine even if we could. If Gau dies, then all the Conclave will reform around Nerbros Eser, who plans to destroy

the Colonial Union. If Nerbros Eser takes power, it's all over. The Colonial Union will fall. Humanity dies."

"What am I supposed to do with this information?" I asked.

"Find a way to use it," Szilard said. "And find it fast. And then be ready for everything that happens afterward. And one other thing, Perry. Tell Sagan that while I don't apologize for enhancing her abilities, I do regret the necessity. Let her also know that I suspect she has not yet explored the full range of her capabilities. Tell her that her BrainPal offers the complete range of command functions. Use those words, please."

"What does 'complete range of command functions' mean here?" I asked.

"Sagan can explain it to you if she likes," Szilard said. He reached over to the dash, pressed a button. Phoenix and Phoenix Station reappeared in the windows.

"Now," Szilard said. "Time to get you back to Roanoke, Administrator Perry. You've been gone too long, and you have much to do. Time to get to it, I'd say."

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THIRTEEN

Save for Roanoke itself, the colony of Everest was the youngest human colony, settled just before the Conclave gave its warning to other races not to colonize any longer. Like Roanoke, Everest defenses were modest: a pair of defense satellites and six beam turrets, three each for the two settlements, and one CDF cruiser on rotation. When Everest was hit, it was the *Des Moines* stationed over the settlements. A good ship and a good crew, but the *Des Moines* was not enough to counter the six Arrisian ships that skipped with daring precision into Everest space, firing missiles at the *Des Moines* and the defense satellites as they arrived. The *Des Moines* sheared down its length and began the long fall toward the Everest surface; the defense satellites were rendered into so much floating junk.

The planet's defenses collapsed, the Arrisian ships took their time searing the Everest settlements from orbit, finally dispatching a company to clean up the straggling colonists who remained. In the end 5,800 Everest colonists were dead. The Arrisians left behind no colonists or garrison and made no claim to the planet. They simply eradicated the human presence there.

Erie was no Everest—it was one of the oldest and most heavily populated of the human worlds, with a planetary defense grid and permanent CDF presence that would make it impossible for all but the most insanely ambitious races to make a play for. But even planetary defense grids can't track every single chunk of ice or rock that falls into the gravity well. Several dozen such apparent chunks fell into Erie's

atmosphere, over the Erie city of New Cork. As they fell, the heat generated by the friction of the atmosphere was channeled and focused, powering the compact chemical lasers hidden within the rock.

Several of the beams struck strategic manufacturing concerns in New Cork, related to CDF weapons systems. Several more appeared to strike randomly, slashing through homes, schools and markets, killing hundreds. Their beams spent, the lasers burned up in the atmosphere, leaving no clue who had sent them or why.

This happened as Trujillo, Beata, Kranjic and I made our way back to Roanoke. We were unaware of it at the time, of course. We were unaware of the specific attacks that were going on around the Colonial Union, because the news was kept from us, and because we were focused on our own survival.

"You've offered us the protection of the Obin," I said to Hickory within hours of my return to Roanoke. "We'd like to take advantage of that offer."

"There are complications," Hickory said.

I glanced over at Jane, and then back to Hickory. "Well, of course there are," I said. "It wouldn't be *fun* without complications."

"I sense sarcasm," Hickory said, with utterly no sense of humor whatsoever.

"I apologize, Hickory," I said. "I'm having a bad week and it's not getting any better. Please tell what these complications might be."

"After you left, a skip drone arrived from Obinur, and we were finally able to communicate with our government. We have been told that once the *Magellan* disappeared, the Colonial Union formally requested that the Obin not interfere with the Roanoke colony, openly or covertly."

"Roanoke was specified," Jane said.

"Yes," said Hickory.

"Why?" I asked.

"The Colonial Union did not explain," Hickory said. "We now assume it was because an Obin attempt to locate the planet could have disrupted the Colonial Union's attack on the Conclave fleet. Our

government agreed not to interfere but noted that should any harm come to Zoë, we would be greatly displeased. The Colonial Union assured our government that Zoë was reasonably safe. As she was."

"The Colonial Union's attack on the Conclave fleet is over," I said.

"The agreement did not specify when it would be acceptable to interfere," Hickory said, again with no trace of humor. "We are still bound to it."

"So you can do nothing for us," Jane said.

"We are charged with protecting Zoë," Hickory said. "But we have been made to understand that the definition of *protection* extends only so far."

"And if Zoë orders you to protect the colony?" I asked.

"Zoë may order Dickory and me as she wishes," Hickory said. "But it is doubtful that even her intercession would be enough."

I got up from my desk and stalked over to the window to look up at the night sky. "Do the Obin know the Colonial Union is under attack?" I asked.

"We do," Hickory said. "There have been numerous attacks since the destruction of the Conclave fleet."

"Then you know that the Colonial Union will have to make choices as to which colonies it needs to defend and which it will sacrifice. And that Roanoke is more likely to be in that second category."

"We know this," Hickory said.

"But you'll still do nothing to help us," I said.

"Not so long as Roanoke remains part of the Colonial Union," Hickory said.

Jane was on this before I could open my mouth. "Explain that," she said.

"An independent Roanoke would require a new response from us," Hickory said. "If Roanoke declares itself independent of the Colonial Union, the Obin would feel obliged to offer support and aid on an interim basis until the Colonial Union reacquired the planet or agreed to its succession."

"But you would risk alienating the Colonial Union," Jane said.

"The Colonial Union has a number of other priorities at the moment," Hickory said. "We do not feel the repercussions of aiding an

independent Roanoke will be significant in the long run."

"So you *will* help us," I said. "You just want us to declare ourselves independent of the Colonial Union first."

"We neither advise you to secede nor to stay," Hickory said. "We merely note that if you should secede, we will help defend you."

I turned to Jane. "What do you think?"

"I doubt the people of this colony are ready for us to declare their independence," Jane said.

"If the alternative is death?" I said.

"Some of them probably would prefer death to being a traitor," Jane said. "Or to being permanently cut off from the rest of humanity."

"Let's ask them," I said.

The attack on Wabash colony was not much of an attack at all; a few missiles to destroy the colony's administrative offices and landmarks, and a small invading force of a few hundred Bhav soldiers to shoot up the place. But then Wabash wasn't the target. The targets were the three CDF cruisers that skipped in to defend the colony. The skip drone that had alerted the CDF to the attack indicated one Bhav cruiser and three smaller gunboats, all of which could be easily handled by three cruisers. What the skip drone could not indicate is that shortly after it skipped away from Wabash space, six additional Bhav cruisers skipped in, destroyed the satellite that launched the skip drones, and readied themselves for an ambush.

The CDF cruisers entered Wabash space cautiously—by this time it was clear that the Colonial Union was under a general attack, and the CDF ship commanders were neither stupid nor rash. But the odds were against them from the moment they arrived in Wabash space. The CDF cruisers *Augusta*, *Savannah* and *Portland* took down three of the Bhav cruisers and all of the smaller gunships before they were overwhelmed and destroyed, scattering metal, air and crew into the space above the planet. It was three fewer cruisers the CDF had to defend the Colonial Union. It was also a signal that every new incident would have to be met with overwhelming force, constricting the number of colonies the CDF could defend at one time. Priorities already shifted to the new

realities of war shifted once again, and not in the CU's favor, nor in Roanoke's.

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"You're out of your mind," said Marie Black. "We're under attack from this Conclave, it wants to kill us all dead, and your solution to the problem is to go it alone, with no help from the rest of the human race? That's just insane."

The looks up and down the Council table told me that Jane and I were all alone on this one, just like Jane suspected we would be. Even Manfred Trujillo, who knew the situation better than anyone, was taken aback by the suggestion we declare our independence. This was the original tough crowd.

"We wouldn't be alone," I said. "The Obin will help us if we're independent."

"*That* makes me feel safer," Black said, mockingly. "Aliens are planning to murder us all, but don't worry, we've got these *pet* aliens to keep us safe. That is, until they decide they're better off siding with the other aliens."

"That's not a very accurate assessment of the Obin," I said.

"But the Obin's primary concern isn't *our* colony," said Lee Chen. "It's *your* daughter. God forbid something happens to your daughter, because then where will *we* be? The Obin will have no more reason to help us. We'd be isolated from the rest of the Colonial Union."

"We're *already* isolated from the rest of the Colonial Union," I said. "Planets are under attack all over the union. The CDF is already scrambling to respond. We're not a priority. We won't be a priority. We've served our purpose."

"We have only your word for that," Chen said. "We're getting news reports, now that we've got access to our PDAs. There's nothing in the news about anything of this."

"You have my word for it as well," Trujillo said. "I'm not ready to sign on to independence, either, but Perry's not lying. The Colonial Union has its priorities right now, and we're definitely not one of them."

"I'm not trying to say that either of you are not as good as your word," Chen said. "But think of what you're asking us to do here. You're asking us to risk everything—*everything*—on your word."

"Even if we were to agree to this, what then?" asked Lol Gerber, who had replaced Hiram Yoder on the council. "We'd be isolated. If the Colonial Union survives, we'd have to settle with them for raising rebellion. If the Colonial Union were to fall, then we'd be all that is left of the human race, and reliant on the grace of another people for our survival. How long could we expect them to shelter us, if the whole host of the intelligent races want us dead? How could we in good conscience ask the Obin to put their own survival at stake for ours? The Colonial Union is humanity. We belong *in* it, for better or worse."

"It's not all of humanity," I said. "There's Earth."

"Which is kept in a corner by the Colonial Union," Black said. "It's not going to be any help to us now."

I sighed. "I can see where this is going to go," I said. "I asked the Council for its vote, and Jane and I will abide by it. But I beg you, think about it. Don't let your prejudice of the Obin," I glanced at Marie Black, "or a feeling of patriotism blind you to the fact that we are now in a war, and *we* are at the front line—and we have no support from home. We *are* on our own. We need to consider what we have to do to survive, because no one else is looking out for us."

"You've never been this bleak before, Perry," said Marta Piro.

"I don't think things have been this bleak before," I said. "All right then. Let's vote."

I voted to secede. Jane abstained; it was our tradition to only cast one vote between us. Every other member of the Council voted to stay in the Colonial Union.

Technically speaking, mine was the only vote that counted. Of course, technically speaking, by voting to leave the Colonial Union, I had just voted for treason. So maybe everyone else was doing me a favor.

"We're a colony," I said. "Still." Smiles broke out across the table.

"Now what do we do?" Marie Black asked.

"I'm thinking," I said. "Believe me, I'm thinking."

Bonita was a planet that lived up to its name, a lovely place with abundant wildlife with just the right genetic components for human consumption. Bonita had been settled fifteen years earlier; still a young colony, but established enough to have its own personality. Bonita was attacked by the Dtrutz, a species of more ambition than brains. This is one encounter that went decisively for the Colonial Union; the trio of CDF cruisers over Bonita made short work of the Dtrutz invading force, picking off their poorly designed ships first during the initial attack and then in a more leisurely fashion as the Dtrutz ships attempted to reach skip distance before the CDF rail gun projectiles reached the Dtrutz ships. The Dtrutz were not at all successful in this endeavor.

What made the Dtrutz attack notable was not its complete incompetence but the fact that the Dtrutz were not a Conclave species; like the Colonial Union, they were unaffiliated. The Dtrutz were under the same ban on colonization as the Colonial Union. They attacked anyway. They knew—as did an increasing number of races—that the Colonial Union was locked in a wide struggle with elements of the Conclave, and that meant the possibility of peeling away some of the lesser human colonies while the CDF was otherwise occupied. The Colonial Union was wounded and shedding blood in the water, and the lesser fish were coming up from the depths to get a taste.

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"We've come for your daughter," Hickory said to me.

"I beg your pardon," I said. Despite everything, I couldn't resist the urge to crack a grin.

"Our government has determined that it is inevitable that Roanoke will be attacked and destroyed," Hickory said.

"Swell," I said.

"Dickory and I both regret this eventuality," Hickory said, leaning forward slightly for emphasis. "And our inability to assist you in preventing this."

"Well, thanks," I said, hoping it didn't sound too insincere.

Apparently, it did not. "We are not allowed to interfere or offer aid, but we have decided that it is acceptable to remove Zoë from danger,"

Hickory continued. "We've requested a transport ship for her and for us; it is on its way. We wanted to let you know of these plans because she is your daughter, and because we have also secured permission to transport you and Jane if you wish."

"So the three of us can escape from this mess," I said. Hickory nodded. "What about everyone else?"

"We have no permission to accommodate others," Hickory said.

"But does no permission mean you *can't* accommodate others?" I asked. "If Zoë wants to take her best friend Gretchen, are you going to tell her no? And do you think Zoë is going to leave if Jane and I stay?"

"Do you plan to stay?" Hickory asked.

"Of course we do," I said.

"You will die," Hickory said.

"We might," I said, "although I'm working to avoid that right now. But regardless, Roanoke is where we belong. We're not leaving, and I suspect you'll have a difficult time convincing Zoë to leave without us, or without her friends."

"She would leave if you told her to," Hickory said.

I smiled, reached on my desk to key my PDA, and sent a message to Zoë to meet me immediately in my office. She arrived a few minutes later.

"Hickory and Dickory want you to leave Roanoke," I said.

"Are you and Mom coming?" Zoë asked.

"No," I said.

"Then the hell with that," Zoë said, looking directly at Hickory as she said so.

I held my hands open in supplication to Hickory. "Told you," I said.

"You didn't tell her to come away," Hickory said.

"Go away, Zoë," I said.

"Screw you, ninety-year-old dad," Zoë said, smiling and yet deadly serious at the same time. Then she turned back to the Obin. "And screw the both of you, too. And while we're at it, screw being whatever it is that I am to the Obin. If you want to protect me, protect the people I care about. Protect this colony."

"We cannot," Hickory said. "We've been forbidden to do so."

"Then you have a problem," Zoë said. Her smile was gone, and her eyes were glistening. "Because I'm not going *anywhere*. And there's nothing either you or anyone can do to change that." Zoë stormed out.

"That went pretty much exactly as I expected," I said.

"You didn't do all you could do to convince her," Hickory said.

I squinted at Hickory. "You're suggesting I was insincere."

"Yes," Hickory said. Its expression was even more unreadable than usual, but I can't imagine that saying something like that was easy for it; the emotional response would probably cause it to shut down its interface soon.

"You're right," I said. "I *was* insincere."

"But *why*?" Hickory asked, and I was surprised by the plaintiveness in its voice. It was shaking now. "You have killed your own child, and the child of Charles Boutin."

"She's not dead yet," I said. "And neither are we. Neither is this colony."

"You know we cannot allow Zoë to come to harm," Dickory said, breaking his silent act. I was reminded that he was in actuality the superior of the two Obin.

"Are you going to go back to the plan of killing me and Jane to protect Zoë?" I asked.

"It is to be hoped not," Dickory said.

"What a delightfully ambiguous answer," I said.

"It's not ambiguous," Hickory said. "You know what our position is. What it must be."

"And I'd ask you to remember what *my* position is," I said. "I've told you that in every circumstance you should protect Zoë. That position has not changed."

"But you have made it substantially more difficult," Hickory said. "You may have made it impossible."

"I don't think so," I said. "Let me make a proposal to the two of you. You have a ship arriving soon. I'm going to promise you that Zoë will leave with you on that ship. But you have to promise me that you take her where I am going to ask her to go."

"Where is that?" Hickory said.

"I'm not going to tell you yet," I said.

"That will make it difficult for us to agree," Hickory said.

"That's the breaks," I said. "But I guarantee you where you're taking her will be more safe than here. Now. Agree, and I'll make sure she goes with you. Don't, you'll have to find a way to protect her here, or kill me and Jane trying to drag her away. These are your choices."

Hickory and Dickory leaned in and conversed for several minutes, longer than I had ever seen them converse before.

"We accept your condition," Hickory said.

"Good," I said. "Now all I have to do is get Zoë to agree. Not to mention Jane."

"Will you tell us now where we will be taking Zoë?" Hickory asked.

"To deliver a message," I said.

The *Kristina Marie* had just docked at Khartoum Station when its engine compartment shattered, vaporizing the back quarter of the trading ship and driving the front three-quarters of the ship directly into Khartoum Station. The station's hull buckled and snapped; air and personnel burst from the fracture lines. Across the impact zone airtight bulkheads sprang into place, only to be torn from their moorings and sockets by the encroaching inertial mass of the *Kristina Marie*, itself bleeding atmosphere and crew from the collision. When the ship came to rest, the explosion and collision had crippled Khartoum Station, and killed 566 people on the station and all but six members of the *Kristina Marie*'s crew, two of whom died shortly thereafter of their injuries.

The explosion of the *Kristina Marie* did more than destroy the ship and much of Khartoum Station; it coincided with the harvest of Khartoum's hogfruit, a native delicacy that was one of Khartoum's major exports. Hogfruit spoiled quickly after ripening (it got its name from the fact Khartoum's settlers fed the overripe fruit to their pigs, who were the only ones who would eat them at that point), so Khartoum had invested heavily to be able to harvest and ship for export its hogfruit crop within days of ripening, via Khartoum Station. The *Kristina Marie* was only one of a hundred Colonial Union trade ships above Khartoum, awaiting its share of the fruit.

With Khartoum Station down, the streamlined distribution system for the hogfruit ground into disarray. Ships dispatched shuttles to Khartoum itself to try to pack in as many crates of the fruit as possible, but this led to confusion on the ground in terms of which hogfruit producers had priority in shipping their product, and which trade ships had priority in receiving them. Fruit had to be unpacked from storage containers and repacked into shuttles; there were not nearly enough cargo men for the job. The vast majority of hogfruit rotted in its containers, delivering a major shock to the Khartoum economy, which would be compounded in the long term by the need to rebuild Khartoum Station—the economic lifeline for other exports as well—and bolster the defenses of Khartoum from further attack.

Before the *Kristina Marie* docked at Khartoum Station, it transmitted its identification, cargo manifest and recent itinerary as part of the standard security "handshake." The records showed that two stops previous, the *Kristina Marie* had traded at Quii, the homeworld of the Qui, one of the Colonial Union's few allies. It had docked next to a ship of Ylan registry, the Ylan being members of the Conclave. Forensic analysis of the explosion left no doubt that it was intentionally triggered and not an accidental breach of the engine core. From Phoenix came the order that no trade ship that had visited a nonhuman world in the last year was to approach a space station without a thorough scan and inspection. Hundreds of trade ships floated in space, their cargo unpacked and crews quarantined in the original Venetian sense of the word, awaiting the eradication of a different sort of plague.

The *Kristina Marie* had been sabotaged and sent on its way, to the place where its destruction could have the most impact, not just in deaths but in paralyzing the economy of the Colonial Union. It worked brilliantly.

The Roanoke Council didn't react well to the news that I had sent Zoë to deliver a message to General Gau.

"We need to discuss your treason problem," Manfred Trujillo said to me.

"I don't have a problem with treason," I said. "I can stop anytime." I looked around the table at the rest of the Council members. The little joke didn't go over well.

"Goddamn it, Perry," Lee Chen said, angrier than I'd ever seen him. "The Conclave is planning to kill us, and you're passing notes to its leader?"

"And you've used your daughter to do it," Marie Black said, disgust creeping into her voice. "You've sent your only child to our enemy."

I glanced over at Jane and Savitri, both of whom nodded to me. We knew this was going to come up; we had discussed how best to handle it when it did.

"No, I didn't," I said. "We have enemies and lots of them, but General Gau isn't one of them." I told them of my conversation with General Szilard of the Special Forces, and his warning of the assassination attempt on Gau. "Gau has promised us that he wouldn't attack Roanoke," I said. "If he dies, there's nothing between us and whoever wants to kill us."

"There's nothing between us and them *now*," Lee Chen said. "Or did you miss the attack on us a couple of weeks back?"

"I didn't miss it," I said. "And I suspect it would have been much worse if Gau didn't have at least some control over the Conclave. If he knows about this assassination attempt he can use it to get back control of the rest of the Conclave. And then we'll be safe. Or at least safer. I decided it was worth it to take the risk to let him know."

"You didn't put it up for a vote," said Marta Piro.

"I didn't have to," I said. "I am still colony leader. Jane and I decided that this was the best thing to do. And it's not like you would have said 'yes,' anyway."

"But it's *treason*," Trujillo repeated. "For real this time, John. This is more than coyly asking the general not to bring his fleet here. You're interfering with the internal politics of the Conclave. There's no way the Colonial Union is going to let you do this, especially when they've already hauled you up in front of an inquiry."

"I'll take responsibility for my actions," I said.

"Yes, well, unfortunately, we will all have to take responsibility for them, *too*," Marie Black said. "Unless you think the Colonial Union is

going to assume you've been doing this all on your own."

I eyed Marie Black. "Just out of curiosity, Marie, what do you think the CU is going to *do*? Send CDF troops here to arrest me and Jane? Personally I think that would be *fine.* Then at least there'd be a military presence here if we're attacked. The only other option would be that they hang us out to dry, and you know what? That's what's happening *already*."

I looked around the table. "I think we need to reemphasize again a salient fact that keeps getting overlooked, here: We are completely, entirely and utterly *on our own*. Our value to the Colonial Union now is in our demise, to rally the other colonies to join in the fight with their own citizens and treasuries. I don't mind being a symbol for the rest of the Colonial Union, but I don't want to have to die for the privilege. I don't want any of *you* to have to die for the privilege, either."

Trujillo looked over to Jane. "You agree with all of this," he said to her.

"John got his information from my former commanding officer," Jane said. "I have issues to settle with him on a personal level. I don't doubt the information is good."

"But does he have an agenda?" Trujillo asked.

"Of course he has an agenda," Jane said. "He wants to keep the rest of the universe from stomping on us like we're fucking bugs. I thought he made that pretty clear."

That put a pause to Trujillo. "I mean does he have an agenda we don't see," he said, finally.

"I doubt it," Jane said. "Special Forces are pretty straightforward. We're sneaky when it's necessary, but when it comes to it, we come at you straight on."

"Which makes him the first," I said. "The Colonial Union hasn't dealt with us honestly in any of this."

"They didn't have a choice," Lee Chen said.

"Don't give me that," I said. "We're too far along in this to swallow that one whole anymore. Yes, the CU was playing a deep game with the Conclave, and it didn't bother to tell us pawns what the game was. But

now the CU is playing a new game and it's dependent on us being taken off the board."

"We don't know that for sure," Marta Piro said.

"We know we have no defenses," Trujillo said. "And we know where we stand in the line to get more. Regardless of the reasons, John's right. We're up against it."

"I still want to know how you can live with sending your daughter to negotiate with this General Gau," Marie Black said.

"It made sense," Jane said.

"I don't see how," Black said.

"Zoë is traveling with the Obin," Jane said. "The Obin are not actively hostile with the Conclave. General Gau will receive the Obin, where he could not receive a Colonial ship."

"Even if we could somehow *get* a Colonial ship, which we can't," I said.

"Neither John nor I can leave the colony without our absence being noted by both the Colonial Union and our own settlers," Jane said. "Zoë, on the other hand, has a special relationship with the Obin. Her leaving the planet at the Obin's insistence was something the Colonial Union would expect."

"There's another advantage, too," I said. Heads swiveled to me. "Even if I or Jane could have made the trip, there'd be no reason for Gau to accept our information as genuine or in earnest. The leaders of colonies have sacrificed themselves before. But with Zoë, we're giving Gau more than information."

"You're giving him a hostage," Trujillo said.

"Yes," I said.

"You're playing a risky game," Trujillo said.

"*This* isn't a game," I said. "We had to make sure we were heard. And it's a calculated risk. The Obin are with Zoë, and I don't think they'll stand idly by if Gau does anything stupid."

"You're still risking her life," Black said. "You're risking her life and she's only a child."

"If she stayed here, she would have died like the rest of us," Jane said. "By going, she'll live, and she gives us a chance to survive. We did the right thing."

Marie Black opened her mouth to respond. "You need to think *very* hard about the next thing you say concerning my daughter," Jane said. Black closed her mouth with an audible *clack*.

"You've set this course of action without us," Lol Gerber said. "But you're telling us now. I'd like to know the reason why."

"We sent Zoë because we thought it was necessary," I said. "That was our decision to make, and we made it. But Marie is right: *You* are going to have to live with consequences of our actions. We had to tell you. If Marie's any indication, some of you have lost confidence in us. Right now you need leaders you feel you can trust. We've told you what we've done and why. One of the consequences of our actions is that now you need to vote on whether you want us to lead the colony any further."

"The Colonial Union won't accept anyone new," Marta Piro said.

"I think that depends on what you tell them," I said. "If you tell them we've been consorting with the enemy, I'm guessing they'd approve the change."

"So you're also asking us whether or not to turn you in to the Colonial Union," Trujillo said.

"We're asking you to do what you think is necessary," I said. "Just as we have done." I stood up; Jane followed. We walked outside of our office and into the Roanoke sunlight.

"How long do you think it will take?" I asked Jane.

"Not long," Jane said. "I expect Marie Black will make sure of that."

"I want to thank you for not killing her," I said. "It would have made the vote of confidence problematic."

"I *did* want to kill her, but not because she was wrong," Jane said. "She's right. We're risking Zoë's life. And she's a child."

I walked over to my wife. "She's almost as old as you are," I said, rubbing her arm.

Jane pulled away. "It's not the same and you know it," she said.

"No, it's not," I said. "But Zoë's old enough to understand what she's doing. She's lost people she's cared for, just like you have. Just like I have. And she knows that she stands to lose a lot more. She chose to go. We gave her a choice."

"We gave her a *false* choice," Jane said. "We stood in front of her and gave her the choice of risking her own life or risking the lives of everyone she knows, including ours. You can't tell me that was a fair set of choices to give her."

"It's not," I said. "But those were the choices we had to give her."

"I hate this fucking universe," Jane said, looking away. "I hate the Colonial Union. I hate the Conclave. I hate this colony. I hate all of it."

"How do you feel about me?" I asked.

"Now is not a good time to ask," Jane said. We sat and waited.

A half hour later Savitri walked out of the administration office. Her eyes were red. "Well, there's good news and bad news," she said. "The good news is that you have ten days before they tell the CU that you've been talking to General Gau. You have Trujillo to thank for that."

"That's something," I said.

"Yeah," Savitri said. "The bad news is that you're out. Both of you. Unanimous vote. I'm just the secretary. I couldn't vote. Sorry."

"Who has the job now?" Jane asked.

"Trujillo," Savitri said. "Of course. Bastard started angling for the job before you two closed the door."

"He's really not that bad," I said.

"I know," Savitri said, and wiped her eyes. "I'm just trying to make you feel like I'll miss you."

I smiled. "Well, I appreciate that." I gave her a hug. She hugged me back fiercely, and then stepped back.

"What now?" Savitri asked.

"We have ten days," I said. "Now we wait."

The ship knew the Roanoke defenses, or lack thereof, which is why it appeared in the sky on the other side of the planet, where the colony's single defense satellite couldn't see it. The ship let itself down gently into the atmosphere to avoid the heat and drama of reentry, and slowly crossed the longitudes of the globe, heading toward the colony. Before the ship crossed the defense satellite's perceptual horizon, and the heat of its engines would be sensed by it, the ship cut them out, and began a

long gravity-assisted glide toward the colony, its small mass supported by immense but whisper-thin electrically-generated wings. The ship fell, silently, toward its target, us.

We saw it just as it finished its long glide and discarded its wings, switching over to maneuvering jets and flotation fields. The sudden plumes of heat and energy were caught by the satellite, which immediately sent a warning—too late, as it turned out, because by the time it had signaled, the ship had already maneuvered to land. The satellite sped telemetry to our beam turrets and warmed up its own beam defenses, which were now fully recharged.

Jane, who was still in charge of colony defense, signaled for the satellite to stand down. The ship was now within colony borders, if not within the walls of Croatoan; if the satellite fired, the colony itself would be damaged. Jane likewise took the beam turrets offline; they too would end up causing more damage to the colony than the ship would.

The ship landed; Jane and Trujillo and I walked out to meet it. As we walked a bay on the ship slid open. A passenger shot out from the bay, yelling and running at Jane, who prepared herself for the impact. Badly, as it turned out, because she and Zoë both tumbled to the ground. I went over to laugh at them; Jane grabbed an ankle and pulled me down to the pile. Trujillo stood at a prudent distance, so as not to get caught up in the mess.

"It took you long enough," I said to Zoë, after I finally detangled myself. "Another day and a half, and your mom and I would be headed to Phoenix on a treason charge."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," Zoë said. "I'm just glad to see you." She grabbed me in another hug.

"Zoë," Jane said. "You saw General Gau."

"Saw him?" Zoë said. "We were there for the assassination attempt."

"You *what*?" Jane and I said simultaneously.

Zoë held up her hands, placatingly. "Survived it," she said. "As you can see."

I looked over to Jane. "I think I just wet myself," I said.

"I'm fine," Zoë said. "It wasn't that bad, really."

"You know, even for a teenager, you might be a bit blasé about this," I said. Zoë grinned. I hugged her again, even more tightly.

"And the general?" Jane said.

"Survived it too," Zoë said. "And not *just* survived it. Came out of it furious. He's using the attempt to call people on the carpet. To demand their loyalty to him."

"To him?" I said. "That doesn't sound like him. He said to me that the Conclave wasn't an empire. If he's demanding loyalty, it sounds like he's making himself an emperor."

"Some of his closest advisers *did* just try to murder him," Zoë said. "He could use some personal loyalty right now."

"I can't argue that," I said.

"But it's not over," Zoë said. "That's why I came back. There's still a group of planets holding out. They're led by someone named Eser. Nerbros Eser. They've been the ones attacking the Colonial Union, he said."

"Right," I said, remembering what General Szilard had said about Eser.

"General Gau gave me a message for you," Zoë said. "He says that Eser is coming here. Soon. Eser wants to take Roanoke because the general couldn't. Taking Roanoke gives him leverage, the general said. A way to show he's more able to lead the Conclave."

"Of course," I said. "Everyone else is using Roanoke as a pawn. Why not this asshole?"

"If this Eser is attacking the Colonial Union at large, then he's not going to have any trouble finishing us off," Trujillo said. He was still keeping his distance from the pile.

"The general said that his information says that Eser doesn't plan to hit us from space," Zoë said. "He wants to land here, to take Roanoke with troops. The general said he would use just enough to take the colony. Sort of the opposite of what the general did with his fleet. To make a point. There's more in the files the general gave me."

"So it will be a small attack force," I said. Zoë nodded.

"Unless he's coming with just himself and a couple of friends, we're still going to have a problem," Trujillo said, and nodded toward me and

Jane. “You two are the only ones with any real military training. Even with our ground defenses, we won’t last long against real soldiers.”

Jane was about to respond, but Zoë beat her to it. “I’ve thought of that,” she said.

Trujillo appeared to stifle a grin. “*You* have,” he said.

Zoë turned serious. “Mr. Trujillo, your daughter is my best friend in the world,” she said. “I don’t want her to die. I don’t want *you* to die. I’m in a position to help. Please don’t condescend to me.”

Trujillo straightened up. “I apologize, Zoë,” he said. “I meant no disrespect. It’s just I wasn’t expecting you to have a plan.”

“And neither was I,” I said.

“You remember a long time ago I complained that being an object of worship for an entire race of people wasn’t even good enough to get me out of homework,” Zoë said.

“Vaguely,” I said.

“Well, while I was away I decided to find out what it *was* actually good for,” Zoë said.

“I still don’t get it,” I said.

Zoë took my hand, and then reached out to Jane for hers. “Come on,” she said. “Hickory and Dickory are still inside the ship. They’re keeping an eye on something for me. I want to show it to you.”

“What is it?” Jane asked.

“It’s a surprise,” Zoë said. “But I think you’re going to like it.”

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FOURTEEN

Jane woke me up by pushing me out of bed.

"What the hell?" I said, groggily, from the floor.

"The satellite feed just went down," she said. Jane was up, grabbed a pair of high-powered binoculars from the dresser, and went outside. I woke up quick and followed her.

"What do you see?" I said.

"The satellite's gone," she said. "There's a ship not too far from where the satellite should be."

"This Eser is not one for subtlety," I said.

"He doesn't think he has to be," Jane said. "It wouldn't suit his purposes anyway."

"Are we ready for this?" I said.

"It doesn't matter if we're ready," Jane said, and dropped her binoculars to look at me. "It's time."

To be fair, after Zoë returned, we let the Department of Colonization know that we believed we were under imminent threat of attack and that our defenses against such an attack were almost nil. We begged for more support. What we got was a visit from General Rybicki.

"You two must have swallowed a handful of pills," Rybicki said, without preamble, when he walked into the administrator's office. "I'm beginning to be sorry I suggested you for colony leaders."

"We're not the colony leaders anymore," I said, and pointed at Manfred Trujillo, who was seated behind my former desk. "He is."

This threw Rybicki off stride; he looked at Trujillo. "You have no authorization to be colony leader."

"The colonists would disagree with you," Trujillo said.

"The colonists don't get a vote," Rybicki said.

"They'd disagree with you on that, too," Trujillo said.

"Then *they've* swallowed stupid pills along with you three," Rybicki said, and turned back to me and Jane. "What the hell is going on here?"

"I thought our message to the Department of Colonization was pretty clear," I said. "We have reason to believe we're about to be attacked, and those who are going to attack us are planning to wipe us out. We need defenses or we're going to die."

"You sent the message *in the clear*," Rybicki said. "Anyone could have picked it up."

"It was encrypted," I said. "Military encryption."

"It was encrypted with a protocol that's compromised," Rybicki said. "It's been compromised for years." He looked up at Jane. "*You* of all people should have known that, Sagan. You're responsible for this colony's safety. You know which encryption to use."

Jane said nothing.

"So you're saying that now anyone who cares to hear knows we're vulnerable," I said.

"I'm saying that you might as well have taped bacon to your head and walked into a tiger pit," Rybicki said.

"Then all the more reason for the Colonial Union to defend us," Trujillo said.

Rybicki glanced back over to Trujillo. "I'm not talking anymore with him around," he said. "It doesn't matter what sort of cozy agreement you have going here, the fact of the matter is you two are on the hook for the colony, not him. It's time to get serious, and what we need to talk about is classified. *He* doesn't rate."

"He's still colony leader," I said.

"I don't care if you've crowned him King of Siam," Rybicki said. "He needs to go."

"Your call, Manfred," I said.

"I'll go," Trujillo said, standing up. "But you need to know this, General Rybicki. We know here how the Colonial Union has used us, played with our destiny and toyed with the lives of all of us. Our lives, the lives of our families and the lives of our children. If the Colonial Union doesn't defend us now, we'll know who really killed us. Not some other species and not the Conclave. The Colonial Union. Pure and simple."

"That's a nice speech, Trujillo," Rybicki said. "It doesn't make it true."

"General, at the moment, I wouldn't place you as an authority on truth," Trujillo said. He nodded to me and Jane and left before the general could retort.

"We're going to tell him everything you say to us," I said, after Trujillo left.

"Then you'll be treasonous as well as incompetent," Rybicki said, sitting at the desk. "I don't know what you two think you're doing, but whatever it is, it's insane. You," he looked up at Jane, "I *know* you know that encryption protocol had been compromised. You had to know that you were broadcasting your vulnerability. I can't even begin to fathom why you did it."

"I have my reasons," Jane said.

"Fine," Rybicki said. "Tell me."

"No," Jane said.

"Excuse me?" The general asked.

"I said no," Jane said. "I don't trust you."

"Oh, that's *rich*," Rybicki said. "You've just painted a big fat target on your colony and *I* can't be trusted."

"There are a lot of things the Colonial Union did with Roanoke they didn't bother to tell us about," I said. "Turnabout is fair play."

"Christ," Rybicki said. "We're not in a goddamn *schoolyard*. You're gambling with the lives of these colonists."

"And this is different from what the CU did how?" I asked.

"Because you don't have the authority," Rybicki said. "You don't have the right."

"The Colonial Union has the *right* to gamble with the lives of these colonists?" I asked. "It has the right to place them in the path of an

enemy military who means to destroy them? These aren't soldiers, General. They're civilians. Some of our people are religious pacifists. *You* made sure of that. The Colonial Union may have had the *authority* to put these people in harm's way. But it sure as hell didn't have the *right*."

"Have you ever heard of Coventry?" Rybicki said.

"The English city?" I asked.

Rybicki nodded. "In the Second World War, the British learned through intelligence that their enemies were going to bomb the town. They knew when it was going to happen. But if they evacuated the town they'd reveal that they knew the enemies' secret code, and they would lose their ability to listen in on the enemies' plans. For the good of all of Britain they let the bombing happen."

"You're saying Roanoke is the Colonial Union's Coventry," Jane said.

"I'm saying that we have an implacable enemy who wants us all dead," Rybicki said. "And that we have to look at what's best for humanity. *All* of humanity."

"This assumes that what the Colonial Union does is what's best for all of humanity," I said.

"Not to put too fine a point on it, but what it does is better than what anyone else has planned for humanity," Rybicki said.

"But *you* don't think that what the Colonial Union is doing is what's best for all humanity," Jane said.

"I didn't say that," Rybicki said.

"You're thinking it," Jane said.

"You have no idea what I'm thinking," Rybicki said.

"I know precisely what you're thinking," Jane said. "I know you're here to tell us that the Colonial Union doesn't have ships or soldiers to defend us. I know you know that there are ships and soldiers for our defense but that they've been assigned to roles you find redundant or nonessential. I know you're supposed to deliver a convincing lie to us about that. That's why you're here personally, to give the lie a personal touch. And I know it disgusts you that you're being made to do this, but that it disgusts you even more that you've allowed yourself to do it."

Rybicki stared at Jane, mouth open. So did I.

"I know you think the Colonial Union is acting stupidly in sacrificing Roanoke to the Conclave. I know you know that there are already plans to use our loss for recruiting among the colonies. I know you think that recruiting from the colonies makes them more vulnerable to attack, not less, because now the Conclave will have a reason to target civilian populations in order to cut down the number of potential soldiers. I know you see this as an endgame for the Colonial Union. I know you think the Colonial Union will lose. I know you fear for me and John, for this colony, and for yourself, and for all of humanity. I know you think there's no way out."

Rybicki sat in silence for a long moment. "You seem to know a lot," he said, finally.

"I know enough," Jane said. "But now we need to hear all of this from you."

Rybicki looked over to me, and back to Jane. He sagged and shifted uncomfortably. "What can I tell you that you don't seem to know already?" he said. "The Colonial Union has nothing for you. I argued for them to give you something, *anything*"—he looked over to Jane to see if she would acknowledge the truth of this, but she only stared impassively—"but they've made the decision to hold the line at the more developed colonies. I was told it was a more strategic use of our military strength. I don't agree, but it's not an indefensible argument to make. Roanoke isn't the only newer colony left exposed."

"We're just the one that's known to be targeted," I said.

"I'm supposed to give you a reasonable story for the lack of defenses," Rybicki said. "The one I settled on was that your sending your plea for help with compromised encryption put our ships and soldiers at risk. This has the advantage of possibly being true"—he looked sharply at Jane when he said this—"but it's primarily a cover story. I didn't come just to give it a convincing touch. I came because I felt I owed it to you to say it to your faces."

"I don't know how to feel about the fact you're more comfortable lying to us up close than far away," I said.

Rybicki smiled a bitter smile. "In retrospect, it appears not to have been one of my best decisions." He turned back to Jane. "I still want to

know how you knew all this."

"I have my sources," Jane said. "And you've told us what we need to know. The Colonial Union has cut us loose."

"It wasn't my decision," Rybicki said. "I don't think it's right."

"I know," Jane said. "But that doesn't really matter at this point."

Rybicki looked to me for a more sympathetic view. He didn't get one.

"What do you plan to do now?" he asked.

"We can't tell you," Jane said.

"Because you don't trust me," Rybicki said.

"Because the same source that lets me know what you're thinking will let someone else know what we're planning," Jane said. "We can't afford that."

"But you're planning *something*," Rybicki said. "You used a cracked encryption to send us a message. You wanted it to be read. You're trying to draw *someone* here."

"It's time for you to go, General," Jane said.

Rybicki blinked, unused to being dismissed. He got up and went to the door, turning back to us as he got to it. "Whatever you two are doing, I hope it works," he said. "I don't know how it will all turn out if you manage to save this colony. But it's got to be better than how it turns out if you don't." He left.

I turned to Jane. "You need to tell me how you did that," I said. "How you got that information. You didn't share that with me before."

"I didn't have it before," she said, and tapped her temple. "You told me that General Szilard said that he gave me the full range of command functions. One of those command functions, in the Special Forces at least, is the ability to read minds."

"Excuse me?" I said.

"Think about it," Jane said. "When you have a BrainPal, it learns to read your thoughts. That's how it works. Using it to read *other* people's thoughts is just a software issue. Generals in the Special Forces have access to their soldiers' thoughts, although Szilard told me most of the time it's not very useful, since people are thinking about pointless things. This time, it came in handy."

"So anyone who has a BrainPal can have their thoughts read," I said.

Jane nodded. "And now you know why I couldn't come to Phoenix Station with you. I didn't want to give anything away."

I motioned toward the door Rybicki had just stepped out of. "You just gave it away to him," I said.

"No," Jane said. "He doesn't know I've been enhanced. He's just wondering who on his staff leaked, and how it got to me."

"You're still reading his mind," I said.

"Haven't stopped since he landed," Jane said. "Won't stop until he's gone."

"What's he thinking now?" I asked.

"He's still thinking about how I knew that information," Jane said. "And he's thinking about us. He's hoping we succeed. That part wasn't a lie."

"Does he think we will?" I asked.

"Of course not," Jane said.

The beam turrets focused on the incoming missiles and fired, but there were too many missiles to focus on; the turrets went up in excessive blast that flung debris across the fields in which they were located, some distance from Croatoan.

"I'm getting a message," Jane said, to me and Trujillo. "It's an order to stop fighting and to prepare for a landing." She paused. "I'm being told that any further resistance will result in a complete carpet-bombing of the colony. I'm being asked to acknowledge the message. Failure to reply within about a minute will be taken as defiance and bombing will proceed."

"What do you think?" I asked Jane.

"We're as ready as we're going to be for this," Jane said.

"Manfred?" I said.

"We're ready," he said. "And I hope to God this works."

"Kranjic? Beata?" I turned back to where Jann Kranjic and Beata stood, the two of them fully decked out in reporter gear. Beata nodded; Kranjic gave a thumbs-up.

"Tell them that we acknowledge their message and that we are ceasing fire," I said, to Jane. "Tell them we look forward to their arrival to discuss terms of surrender."

"Done," Jane said, a moment later. I turned to Savitri, who was standing next to Beata. "You're on," I said.

"Great," Savitri said, in an entirely unconvincing tone of voice.

"You'll be fine," I said.

"I feel like I'm going to throw up," she said.

"I'm afraid I left the bucket back at the office," I said.

"I'll just throw up on your boots," Savitri said.

"Seriously," I said. "Are you ready to do this, Savitri?"

She nodded. "I'm ready," she said. "Let's do it."

We all went to our positions.

Some time later a light in the sky resolved itself into two troop transports. The transports hovered over Croatoan for some small amount of time before landing a klick away in an unsown field. The field had originally been sown; we had plowed under the early seedlings. We'd planned on troop transports and we hoped to convince them to land in a particular spot by making it more appealing than other places. It worked. In the back of my head I imagined Jane smiling grimly. Jane would have been cautious about landing in the one agricultural field that didn't have plants sticking out of it, but that's one of the reasons we did it. I would have been cautious, too, when I was leading troops. Basic military competence was going to matter here, and this was our first clue as to what sort of fight we had on our hands.

I took my binoculars and peered through. The transports had opened and soldiers were piling out of the bays. They were compact, mottled and thickly skinned; Arrisian, all of them, like their leader. This was another way this invasion force differed from General Gau's fleet. Gau spread the responsibility for his incursions among the entire Conclave; Eser was saving the glory of this attack for his own people.

The soldiers formed into platoons; three platoons, thirty or thirty-five soldiers each. About a hundred overall. Eser was definitely feeling cocky. But then, the one hundred soldiers on the ground were an illusion; no doubt Eser had a few hundred more back on his ship, not to mention that the ship itself was capable of blasting the colony from

orbit. On the ground or above, Eser had more than enough firepower to kill us all several times over. Most of the Arrisian soldiers slung the standard Arrisian automatic rifle, a slug-thrower known for its velocity, accuracy and high rate of fire. Two soldiers in each platoon carried shoulder-mounted missile launchers; given the incursion, this looked like they were going to be for show more than anything else. No beam weapons or flamethrowers as far as I could see.

Now came Eser, flanked by an honor guard. Eser was dressed in Arrisian military gear, a bit of show because he'd never served, but I suppose if you're going to try to show up a general in a military mission, you'd best dress for the part. Eser's limbs were thicker and the fiber tufts around his eyestalks were darker than those of his soldiers; he was older and more out of shape than those who were serving him. But inasmuch as I could figure out any emotion from his alien head, he seemed pretty pleased with himself. He stood in front of his soldiers, gesticulating; it looked like he was giving a speech.

Asshole. He was only a klick away, motionless over flat ground. If I or Jane had the right rifle, we could have taken the top of his head clean off. Then we might be dead, because then his soldiers and his ship would flatten the colony. But it would be fun while it lasted. It was moot; we didn't have the right kind of rifle, and anyway, no matter what happened, we wanted Eser alive at the end of it. Killing him was not in the cards. Alas.

While Eser talked, his guard was actively scanning the environment, looking for threats. I hoped that Jane, in her position, was making note of that; not everyone in this little adventure was entirely incompetent. I wistfully wished I could tell her to make a note of it, but we were in radio silence; we didn't want to give away the game before it had begun.

Eser finally stopped with his talk and the whole company of soldiers began to walk across the field toward the road that linked the farm to Croatoan. A squad of soldiers took the lead, looking for threat and movement; the rest moved in formation but without much discipline. No one expected much resistance.

Nor would they find any on the road to Croatoan. The entire colony was awake and aware of the invasion, of course, but we warned

them all to stay in their homes or in their shelters and not to engage while the soldiers passed into Croatoan. We wanted them to play the part of the cowed and frightened colonists they were supposed to be. For some of them, this wasn't going to be a problem; for others it was going to take effort. The former group we wanted to be safe as possible; the latter group we wanted contained. We gave them tasks for later, if there was a later.

No doubt the forward squad were scanning the surroundings with infrared and heat sensors, looking for sneak attacks. All they would find are colonists up and at their windows, staring into the darkness as the soldiers marched by. I could see in my binoculars that at least a couple of colonists stood on their porches to see the soldiers. Mennonites. They were pacifists, but they sure as hell weren't scared of anything.

Croatoan remained as it was when we had begun: a modern-day take on the Roman legion camp, still ringed by two sets of cargo containers. Most of the colonists who had lived there had long abandoned it for homes and farms of their own, but a few people continued to live there, including me and Jane and Zoë, and several permanent buildings stood where the tents used to be. The recreation area at the center of the camp still remained, in front of a lane that passed along it and behind the administration building. In the center of the recreation area stood Savitri, alone. She would be the first human the Arrisian soldiers and Eser would see; the only one, hopefully, that they would see.

I could see Savitri from where I was. The early morning was not cold, but she was clearly shivering.

The first of the Arrisian soldiers reached the perimeter of Croatoan and called a halt to the march as they examined the surroundings to be sure they weren't walking into a trap. This took several minutes, but eventually they were satisfied that there was nothing there that could harm them. They restarted the march and the Arrisian soldier tromped in, piling up in the recreation center, keeping a wary eye on Savitri, who stood there, silent and now shivering only a little. In a very short amount of time all the soldiers were within the cargo container-lined borders of Croatoan.

Eser came up through the ranks with his guard and stood before Savitri. He motioned for a translator device.

"I am Nerbros Eser," he said.

"I'm Savitri Guntupalli," Savitri said.

"You're the leader of this colony," Eser said.

"No," Savitri said.

Eser's eyestalks jiggled at this. "Where are this colony's leaders?" he asked.

"They're busy," Savitri said. "That's why they sent me out to talk to you."

"And who are you?" Eser said.

"I'm the secretary," Savitri said.

Eser's eyestalks extended angrily and almost banged together. "I have the power to level this entire colony, and its leader sends his *secretary* to meet me," he said. Clearly any hint of magnanimity Eser may have been planning in victory was flying right out the window.

"Well, they did give me a message for you," Savitri said.

"They *did*," Eser said.

"Yes," Savitri said. "I was told to tell you that if you and your troops were willing to get back into your ships and just go back where you came from, we'd be happy to let you live."

Eser goggled and then emitted a high *screee*, the Arrisian noise for amusement. Most of his soldiers *screed* along with him; it was like a convention of angry bees. Then he stopped his *scree* and stalked right up to Savitri, who like the star she is, didn't even flinch.

"I was planning to let most of your colonists survive," Eser said. "I was going to have this colony's leaders executed for the crimes against the Conclave, when they helped the Colonial Union ambush our fleet. But I was going to spare your colonists. You are tempting me to change my mind on that."

"So, that's a *no*, then," Savitri said, staring directly into his eyestalks.

Eser stepped back, and turned to one of his guards. "Kill her," he said. "Then let's get to work."

The guard raised his weapon, sighted in on Savitri's torso, and tapped the trigger panel on his rifle.

The rifle exploded, shearing vertically in the plane perpendicular to the rifle's firing mechanism and sending a vertical planar array of energy directly upward. The guard's eyestalks intersected that plane and were severed; he fell screaming in pain, clutching what remained of his stalks.

Eser looked again at Savitri, confused.

"You should have left when you had the chance," Savitri said.

There was a *bang* as Jane kicked open the door of the administration building, the nanomesh suit that hid her body heat covered by standard Department of Colonization police armor, same as the others of us in our little squad. In her arms was something that was *not* standard Department of Colonization issue: A flamethrower.

Jane motioned Savitri back; Savitri didn't need to be told twice. From in front of Jane came the sound of Arrisian screams as panicked soldiers tried to shoot her, only to have their rifles shear and erupt violently in their arms. Jane walked right up to the soldiers, who had begun to wheel back in fear, and poured fire into their midst.

"What is this?" I asked Zoë, when she directed us into the shuttle to look at whatever it was she wanted us to look at. Whatever it was, it was the size of a baby elephant. Hickory and Dickory stood next to it; Jane went to it and started to examine the control panel on one side.

"It's my present to the colony," Zoë said. "It's a sapper field."

"Zapper field," I said.

"No, *sapper*," Zoë said. "With a *ssss*."

"What does it do?" I asked.

Zoë turned to Hickory. "Tell him," she said.

"The sapper field channels kinetic energy," Hickory said. "Redirects the energy upward or any other direction the user chooses and uses the redirected energy to feed the field itself. The user can define at what level the energy is redirected, over a range of parameters."

"You need to explain this to me like I'm an idiot," I said. "Because clearly I am."

"It stops bullets," Jane said, still looking at the panel.

"Come again?" I said.

"This thing generates a field that will suck the energy out of any object that goes faster than a certain speed," Jane said. She looked at Hickory. "That's right, isn't it."

"Velocity is one of the parameters a user may define," Hickory said. "Other parameters can include energy output over a specified time or temperature."

"So we program it to stop bullets or grenades, and it will do it," I said.

"Yes," Hickory said. "Although it works better with physical objects than with energetic ones."

"Works better with bullets than with beams," I said.

"Yes," Hickory said.

"When we define the power levels, anything under that power level retains its energy," Jane said. "We could tune it to stop a bullet but let an arrow fly."

"If the energy of the arrow is below the threshold you define, yes," Hickory said.

"This has possibilities," I said.

"I told you you would like it," Zoë said.

"This is the best present you ever got me, sweetheart," I said. Zoë grinned.

"You should know that this field is of very limited duration," Hickory said. "The power source here is small and will only last a few minutes, depending on the size of the field you generate."

"If we use it to cover Croatoan, how long would it last?" I asked.

"About seven minutes," Jane said. She had figured out the control panel.

"Real possibilities," I said. I turned back to Zoë. "So how did you manage to get the Obin to give us this?" I asked.

"First I reasoned, then I bargained, then I pleaded," Zoë said. "And then I threw a tantrum."

"A tantrum, you say," I said.

"Don't look at me like that," Zoë said. "The Obin are incredibly sensitive to my emotions. You know that. And the idea of every person I love and care about being killed is something I could get emotional

about pretty easily. And on top of every other argument I made, it worked. So don't give me grief for it, ninety-year-old dad. While Hickory and Dickory and I were with General Gau, other Obin got this for us."

I glanced back at Hickory. "I thought you said you weren't allowed to help us, because of your treaty with the Colonial Union."

"I regret to say that Zoë has made a small error in her explanation," Hickory said. "The sapper field is not our technology. It is far too advanced for that. It is Consu."

Jane and I looked at each other. Consu technology was generally breathtakingly advanced over the technology of other species, including our own, and the Consu never parted lightly with any technology they possessed.

"The Consu gave this to you?" I asked.

"They gave it to you, in point of fact," Hickory said.

"And how did they know about us?" I asked.

"In an encounter with some of our fellow Obin, the topic came up in conversation, and the Consu were moved to spontaneously offer you this gift," Hickory said.

I remembered once, not long after I met Jane, that she and I needed to ask the Consu some questions. The cost of answering those questions was one dead Special Forces soldier and three mutilated ones. I had a hard time imagining the "conversation" that resulted in the Consu parting with a piece of technology like this one.

"So the Obin have nothing to do with this gift," I said.

"Other than transporting it here at the request of your daughter, no," Hickory said.

"We must thank the Consu at some point," I said.

"I don't believe that they expect to be thanked," Hickory said.

"Hickory, have you ever lied to me?" I asked.

"I do not believe you are aware of me or any Obin ever lying to you," Hickory said.

"No," I said. "I don't believe I am."

At the rear of the Arrisian column, soldiers scrambled in retreat, back toward the gate of the colony, where Manfred Trujillo waited, sitting at the controls of a cargo lorry we'd stripped down and tinkered with for the purposes of acceleration. The lorry had sat at the side of a close field, quiet and with Trujillo hunkered down until the soldiers had completely entered into Croatoan. Then he powered the lorry's battery packs and slowly crept it along the road, waiting for the screams that would be his signal to put the pedal to the metal.

When Trujillo saw the plumes of Jane's flamethrower, he accelerated hard toward the gate opening of Croatoan. As he passed through the gates he threw on the lorry's floodlights, stunning a trio of fleeing Arrisian soldiers into immobility. These soldiers were the first to be knocked out of their mortality by the massive hurtling truck; more than a dozen others followed as Trujillo plowed through the ranks. Trujillo turned left at the road in front of the town square, sideswiping two more Arrisian soldiers, and prepared to make another run.

As Trujillo's lorry passed through Croatoan's gates, Hickory hit the button to close the gates shut and then it and Dickory both unsheathed a pair of wickedly long knives and prepared to meet the Arrisian soldiers who had the misfortune to run into them. The Arrisian soldiers were out of their wits with confusion as to how a milk run of a military mission could have turned into a massacre—of *them*—but unfortunately for them both Hickory and Dickory were in full possession of their wits, were good with knives and had turned off their emotional implants so that they could slaughter with efficiency.

By this time Jane had also started in with knives, having burned through her flamethrower fuel at the expense of nearly a platoon's worth of Arrisian soldiers. Jane dispatched some of the more grievously burnt soldiers and then turned her attention to those that were still standing, or, actually, running. They ran fast but Jane, modified as she was, ran faster. Jane had researched the Arrisians, their armaments, their armor and their weaknesses. It happened that Arrisian military body armor was vulnerable at the side joins; a sufficiently thin knife could slip in and sever one of the major arteries that ran bilaterally down the Arrisian body. As I watched I saw Jane exploit that knowledge, reaching out to grab a fleeing Arrisian soldier, yanking him back,

sinking her knife into his side armor and leaving him to sag away his life, and then reaching out to the next fleeing soldier, without breaking stride.

I was in awe of my wife. And I understood now why General Szilard didn't apologize for what he had done for her. Her strength and speed and pitilessness was going to save us as a colony.

Behind Jane a quartet of Arrisian soldiers had sufficiently calmed themselves to begin to think tactically once more and had begun to slink toward her, guns abandoned, knives out. This is where I, stationed on top of the inside track of the cargo containers, came in handy: I was air support. I took my compound bow, nocked an arrow and shot it into the neck of the forward-most of the soldiers; not a good thing as I was aiming for the one behind him. The soldier pawed at the arrow before falling forward; the other three broke into a sprint but not before I shot another one in the foot, once more not good because I was aiming for its head. He went down with a *screee*; Jane turned at the sound, and then headed toward him to deal with him.

I looked for the other two among the buildings but didn't see them, and then heard a *clang*. I looked down to see that one of the soldiers was climbing up on the cargo container, the trash bin he had jumped on to get up to where I was clattering away on the ground. I nocked another arrow and shot at him; the arrow struck right in front of him. Clearly the bow was not meant to be my weapon. There was no time to string another arrow; the soldier was up on the cargo container and headed toward me, knife out, screaming something. I had the sinking suspicion I killed someone he really cared about. I grabbed for my own knife and as I did so, the Arrisian attacked, covering the distance between us in an astoundingly short time. I went down; my knife flew off the side of the cargo container.

I rolled with the Arrisian's attack and kicked him off me, scrambling to the side and out of his way. He was on me again instantly, stabbing me in the shoulder and meeting the police armor there. He readied to stab me again; I grabbed an eyestalk and yanked it hard. He scrambled away, squealing and grabbing at the eyestalk, backing up toward the edge. Both my knife and bow were too far away to get to. *Fuck it*, I thought, and launched myself at the Arrisian. We

both flew off the side of the cargo container; as we fell I jammed my arm into his neck. We landed, me on top of him, my arm crushing his windpipe or whatever the equivalent was for him. My arm throbbed in pain; I doubted I would be using that arm productively for a while.

I rolled off the dead Arrisian and looked up; a shadow was hovering up on the cargo container. It was Kranjic; he and Beata were using their cameras to record the battle.

"You alive?" he asked.

"Apparently," I said.

"Look, could you do that again?" he said. "I missed most of it."

I flipped him the middle finger; I couldn't see his face but I suspected he was grinning. "Throw me down my knife and bow," I said. I glanced at my watch. We had another minute and a half to go before we dropped the shield. Kranjic handed down my weapons, and I stalked through the streets, trying to pick off soldiers until I ran out of arrows, and then kept out of their way until time ran out.

Thirty seconds before the shield dropped, Hickory opened the gates of the village and he and Dickory stepped away to let the survivors of the attack flood out in retreat. The couple dozen or so remaining soldiers didn't stop to wonder how the gate had opened; they got the hell out and broke toward their transports stationed a klick in the distance. The last of these soldiers cleared the gate as we dropped the field. Eser and his remaining guard were midway in this pack, the guard rudely pushing his charge along. He still had his rifle; most left their rifles behind, having seen what happened to those who had used them in the village, and assuming they were now entirely useless. I picked up one, as I followed them out; Jane picked up one of the missile launchers. Kranjic and Beata hopped down from the cargo containers and followed; Kranjic bounding ahead and disappearing in the darkness, Beata keeping time with Jane and I.

The retreating Arrisian soldiers were making two assumptions as they retreated. The first was that bullets had no currency on Roanoke. The second was that the terrain they were retreating across was the same as the terrain they had marched in on. Both of these assumptions were wrong, as the Arrisians discovered when the automatic turret defenses along the retreat path opened fire on them, cutting them down

in precise bursts controlled by Jane, who electronically signed off on each target with her BrainPal before they opened fire. Jane didn't want to shoot Eser by accident. The portable turrets had been placed by the colonists after the Arrisians had been shut in Croatoan; they had pulled them out of holes they had dug and covered. Jane had mercilessly drilled the colonists who placed the turrets so they could move them and placed them in the space of just a few minutes. It worked; only one turret was unusable because it was pointing in the wrong direction.

By this time those few remaining Arrisian soldiers with their rifles began to fire them out of desperation and seemed surprised when they worked. Two of them dropped to the ground and began to fire in our direction, to give their compatriots time to get to the transports. I felt a round whistle past before I heard it; I likewise dropped to the ground. Jane turned the turrets on these two Arrisians and made short work of them.

Shortly only Eser and his guard remained, save for the pilots of the two transports, both of whom had fired up their engines and were preparing to get the hell out of Dodge. Jane steadied the shoulder-mounted missile, warned us to hit the deck (I was still there) and fired her missile at the closest transport. The missile blasted past Eser and his guard, causing both to dive to the ground, and slammed into the transport's bay, bathing the interior of the shuttle in explosive flame. The second pilot decided he'd had enough and launched; he got fifty meters up before his transport was struck by not one but two missiles, launched by Hickory and Dickory, respectively. The impacts crushed the transport's engines and sent it careening downward into the woods, tearing trees from the ground with a wrenching, woody sound before crashing with a shattering roar somewhere out of sight.

Eser's guard kept his charge down and stayed low himself, firing in an attempt to take some of us with him when he went.

Jane looked down at me. "That rifle have ammunition?" she asked.

"I hope so," I said.

She dropped the shoulder rocket. "Make enough noise to keep him down," she said. "Don't actually shoot at him."

"What are you doing?" I asked.

She stripped out of her police gear, revealing the skintight, matte black nanomesh underneath. "Getting close," she said, and moved away. She quickly became next to invisible in the dark. I fired at random intervals and stayed low; the guard wasn't hitting me, but it was a matter of centimeters.

There was a surprised grunt in the distance, and then a rather louder *scree*, which stopped soon enough.

"All clear," Jane said. I popped up and headed toward her. She was standing over the body of the guard, the guard's former weapon in her hand, trained on Eser, who lay cowering on the ground.

"He's weaponless," Jane said, and handed me the translation device she apparently took off him. "Here. You get to talk to him."

I took the device and bent down. "Hi there," I said.

"You're all going to die," Eser said. "I have a ship above you right now. It has more soldiers in it. They will come down and hunt all of you. And then my ship will blast every bit of this colony to dust."

"Is that so," I said.

"Yes," said Eser.

"I see I have to be the one to break this to you, then," I said. "Your ship's not there anymore."

"You're lying," Eser said.

"Not really," I said. "The thing is, when you took out our satellite with your ship, that meant the satellite couldn't signal a skip drone we had out there. That drone was programmed to skip only if it didn't receive a signal. Where it went, there were some skip-capable missiles waiting. Those missiles popped into Roanoke space, found your ship and killed it."

"Where did the missiles come from?" Eser demanded.

"It's difficult to say," I said. "The missiles were of Nouri manufacture. And you know the Nouri. They'll sell to just about anyone."

Eser sat there and glowered. "I don't believe you," he finally said.

I turned to Jane. "He doesn't believe me," I said.

Jane flipped me something. "It's his communicator," she said.

I handed it to him. "Call your ship," I said.

Several minutes and some very angry *screees* later, Eser flung his communicator into the dirt. "Why haven't you just killed me?" he asked. "You've killed everyone else."

"You were told that if you left all of your soldiers would live," I said.

"By your *secretary*," Eser spat.

"Actually, she's not my secretary anymore," I said.

"Answer my question," Eser said.

"You're worth more to us alive than dead," I said. "We have someone who is quite interested in keeping you alive. And we were led to believe that turning you over to him in that condition would be useful to us."

"General Gau," Eser said.

"Right you are," I said. "I don't know what Gau has planned for you, but after an assassination attempt and a play to take over the Conclave, I can't imagine it will be very pleasant."

"Perhaps we—" Eser began.

"Let's not even pretend we are going to have that conversation," I said. "You don't get to go from planning to kill everyone on the planet to cutting a deal with me."

"General Gau has," Eser said.

"Very nice," I said. "The difference is that I don't believe you ever planned to spare any of my colonists, while Gau went out of his way to assure that they could be spared. It matters. Now. What's going to happen is that I'm going to hand this translation device over to my wife here, and she's going to tell you what to do. You're going to listen to her, because if you don't, she won't kill you but you'll probably wish she had. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Eser said.

"Good," I said, and stood up to hand the translation to Jane. "Jam him into that cargo hold we use for a jail."

"Way ahead of you," Jane said.

"We still have the skip drone set up to deliver a message to General Gau?" I asked.

"We do," Jane said. "I'll send it once I get Eser squared away. What do we want to tell the Colonial Union?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," I said. "I suppose when they haven't gotten any skip drones for a couple of days that they'll realize something has happened. And then they'll be pissed off we're still here. I'm inclined at the moment to say 'screw them.' "

"That's not a real plan," Jane said.

"I know, but that's what I've got at the moment," I said. "In other news, holy shit. We pulled this off."

"We pulled it off because our enemy was arrogant and incompetent," Jane said.

"We pulled it off because we had *you*," I said. "You planned it. You pulled it off. You made it work. And as much as I hate to say this to you, your being a fully-functional Special Forces soldier made a difference."

"I know it has," Jane said. "I'm not ready to think about that yet."

In the distance we heard someone crying.

"That sounds like Beata," Jane said. I took off toward the sound of the crying, leaving Jane to deal with Eser. I found Beata a couple hundred meters later, hunched over someone.

It was Kranjic. Two of the Arrisians' bullets had hit him, in the collarbone and in the chest. Blood had soaked out into the ground beneath him.

"You dumb son of a bitch," Beata said, holding Kranjic's hand. "You always had to chase a story."

She leaned over to kiss his forehead, and to close his eyes.

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FIFTEEN

"You know you can't stay on Roanoke," General Gau said.

I smiled and looked across at him in the tiny conference room of his flagship, the *Gentle Star*. "Why on earth not?" I said.

Gau paused for a moment; the expression was new to him. "Because you survived," he said, eventually. "Because your colony survived, no doubt to the surprise and irritation of the Colonial Union. Because you gave the enemy information vital to his survival, and because you accepted information from him vital to yours. Because you allowed me to come here to retrieve Nerbros Eser. Because you're here on this ship now, talking to me."

"I'm a traitor," I said.

"I didn't say that," Gau said.

"You *wouldn't* say that," I said. "You're alive because of me."

"Fair point," Gau said. "But that's not what I meant. I meant you're not a traitor because your allegiance was to your colony. To your people. You've never betrayed them."

"Thanks," I said. "Although I don't think the Colonial Union will like that argument much."

"No," Gau said. "I don't expect they would. Which brings me back to my original point."

"What are you going to do with Eser?" I asked.

"My current plan is to put him on trial," Gau said.

"You could just throw him out of an air lock," I said.

"That would give me a great deal of personal satisfaction," Gau said. "But I don't think it would be good for the Conclave."

"But from what Zoë tells me, you've started making people give you personal loyalty oaths," I said. "It's just a short jump from that to having the right to space those who annoy you."

"All the more reason for the trial, wouldn't you say," Gau said. "I would prefer not to have had the loyalty oaths. But apparently there's only so much humility people will take out of their leaders, especially when their leaders have had their fleets blown out from under them."

"Don't blame me," I said.

"I don't," Gau said. "Whether I blame the Colonial Union is another matter entirely."

"What do you plan to do about the Colonial Union now?" I asked.

"The same thing I originally planned to do," Gau said. "Contain it."

"Not attack it," I said.

"No," Gau said. "All the Conclave's internal rebellions are tamped down. Eser isn't the only one facing a trial. But I think it's clear to the Colonial Union now that the Conclave is not easily eradicated. I'd hope they wouldn't try to break out of their box again."

"You haven't learned much about humans," I said.

"On the contrary," Gau said. "If you think I'm simply going back to my old plan, you're a fool. I'm not planning to attack the Colonial Union, but I'm also going to make sure it doesn't get a chance to attack either me or the Conclave a second time."

"How?" I asked.

"You don't really expect me to tell you," Gau said.

"Thought I'd ask," I said. "It was worth a shot."

"Not really," Gau said.

"And what are your plans for Roanoke?" I asked.

"I've already told you that I have no plans to attack it," Gau said.

"You did," I said. "Of course, that was when you had no fleet."

"You doubt me," Gau said.

"No," I said. "I fear you."

"I wish you wouldn't," Gau said.

"I wish I wouldn't, either," I said. "Convince me."

"Roanoke is safe from any further Conclave attack," Gau said. "The Conclave recognizes it as a legitimate human colony. The last colony"—he tapped the conference room table to make the point—"but a legitimate colony nonetheless. You and I can make a treaty, if you like."

"I don't think the Colonial Union would find it binding," I said.

"Probably not," Gau said. "However, I will send an official declaration to your government, with a warning that the Conclave's ban on colonization is unbreakable beyond this. Unofficially, I'll pass the word to unaffiliated races that the Conclave would be extremely displeased if one of them made a play for the planet. They're not supposed to anyway, under the ban. But it doesn't hurt to accentuate the point."

"Thank you, General," I said.

"You're welcome," Gau said. "I'm glad not every world leader was as troublesome as you, however."

"I'm the easygoing one," I said. "It's my wife who's the real hard-ass."

"So I've gathered from Eser and the recordings of the battle," Gau said. "I hope she is not offended that I asked to speak to you alone."

"She's not," I said. "I'm the one who is supposed to be good with people. Although Zoë is disappointed she's not able to see you. You made an impression on her."

"And she on me," Gau said. "You have a remarkable family."

"I agree," I said. "I'm glad they keep me around."

"Technically, your wife and daughter could be charged for treason as well," Gau said. "They will have to leave Roanoke, too, you know."

"You keep bringing that up," I said. "I've been trying not to think about it."

"I don't think that's wise," Gau said.

"Of course it's not wise," I said. "That doesn't mean I don't want to do it."

"Where will you go?" Gau said.

"I haven't the slightest idea," I said. "We can't go anywhere in the Colonial Union unless we want to spend our lives in a family cell

block. The Obin would take us in because of Zoë, but there would always be pressure on the Obin to extradite us."

"There's another option," Gau said. "I've offered to have you join the Conclave before. The offer still stands. You and your family could live among us."

"You're very kind," I said. "I don't know that I could do that. That's the problem with living among the Obin as well. I'm not ready to be cut off from the rest of humanity."

"It's not that bad," Gau said, and I caught the hint of sarcasm there.

"Maybe not for you," I said. "But I would miss my kind."

"The idea behind the Conclave is that many races would live among each other," Gau said. "Are you saying you couldn't do that?"

"I could do that," I said. "But only three humans wouldn't be enough."

"The Conclave would still be happy to admit the Colonial Union," Gau said. "Or any of the individual colony worlds. Or even just Roanoke."

"I don't think that idea will get much traction on Roanoke," I said. "Or with the Colonial Union. And as far as the individual colonies go, I think they're still officially in the dark about the Conclave."

"Yes, the Colonial Union's informational stranglehold," Gau said. "I have to tell you that I've given very serious thought to skipping satellites over the Colonial Union worlds and simply blasting down a data stream on the Conclave until the satellite is shot down. It wouldn't be efficient. But at least then the Conclave could be heard."

I thought about that for a moment. "No," I said. "A data feed wouldn't do."

"Then what would you suggest?" Gau said.

"I'm not sure yet," I said. I looked directly at Gau. "General, I may want to propose something to you."

"What is it?" Gau said.

"Something big," I said. "Something expensive."

"That's not really an answer," Gau said.

"It's going to have to do for now," I said.

"I will be happy to listen to your proposal," Gau said. "But 'something big, something expensive' is a little too vague for me to give

approval."

"Fair enough," I said.

"Why can't you tell me what it is now?" Gau asked.

"I need to talk to Jane first," I said.

"Whatever it is, Administrator Perry, if it's something that involves my help, then you'll be permanently in traitorous territory," Gau said. "At least in the eyes of the Colonial Union."

"It's like you said, General," I said. "It's with whom your allegiances lie."

"I've been ordered to place you under arrest," said Manfred Trujillo.

"Really," I said. The two of us stood in front of the shuttle I was about to leave in.

"The orders came in a couple of hours ago," Trujillo said. "Along with the new communications satellite the CU just gave us. The CU's not pleased about a Conclave ship being in our sky, incidentally."

"So are you arresting me?" I asked.

"I'd love to, but it seems that you and your family can't be found," Trujillo said. "I suspect that you've already left the planet. We'll do a colony-wide search, of course. But I wouldn't really lay good odds on us finding you."

"I'm sneaky, I am," I said.

"I always said that about you," Trujillo said.

"You could get in trouble for that," I said. "The last thing this colony needs is another leader hauled up in front of an inquiry."

"As your colony leader, I can officially tell you to mind your own business," Trujillo said.

"So your ascension has been formally approved," I said.

"If it wasn't, how would I be able to arrest you?" Trujillo said.

"Good point," I said. "Congratulations. You always wanted to run the colony. Now you are."

"It's not the way I planned to get the job," Trujillo said.

"I'm sorry we got in your way, Manfred," I said.

"I'm not," Manfred said. "If I had been leading the colony, we would all be dead now. You, Jane and Zoë saved this colony. I'm happy

to have waited in line."

"Thanks," I said.

"I want you to know it took a lot for me to say that," Trujillo said. I laughed, and looked over to where Zoë was giving a tearful good-bye to Gretchen and other friends.

"Zoë is going to miss Gretchen," I said.

"Gretchen is going to miss Zoë," Trujillo said. "I have half a mind to ask you to let Zoë stay. For Gretchen and for us." Trujillo nodded toward Hickory and Dickory, who stood off to the side, soaking up Zoë's emotional farewell to her friends. "You said you reached an agreement with the Conclave, but I still wouldn't mind having the Obin watching our back."

"Roanoke will be fine," I assured him.

"I think you're right about that," Trujillo said. "I hope so. It would be nice just to be another colony. We've been the center of attention long enough."

"I think I'll be able to draw some attention off you," I said.

"I wish you would tell me what you have planned," Trujillo said.

"As I'm no longer your colony leader, I can't officially tell you to mind your own business," I said. "But mind it anyway."

Trujillo sighed. "You understand my concern," he said. "We've been at the center of everyone else's plans, and none of the plans have worked out even remotely as they should have."

"Including yours," I reminded him.

"Including mine," Trujillo agreed. "I don't know what you're planning, but given the failure rate around here, I'm concerned that the backlash is going to get back here to Roanoke. I'm looking out for my colony. *Our* colony. Our home."

"Our colony," I agreed. "But not my home anymore."

"Even so," Trujillo said.

"You're going to have to trust me, Man," I said. "I've worked hard to keep Roanoke safe. I'm not going to stop doing that now."

Savitri stepped down from the shuttle bay and walked over to us, PDA in hand. "Everything's stowed," she said, to me. "Jane says we're ready when you are."

"You said good-bye to everyone?" I asked her.

"I have," Savitri said, and held up her wrist, which had a bracelet on it. "From Beata. Says it was her grandmother's."

"She's going to miss you," I said.

"I know," Savitri said. "I'm going to miss her. She's my friend. We're all going to miss people. That's why it's called *leaving*."

"*You* could still stay," Trujillo said to Savitri. "There's no reason you need to go with this idiot. I'll even give you a twenty percent raise."

"Oooh, a raise," Savitri said. "It's tempting. But I've been with this idiot for a long time. I like him. I like his family more, of course, but who wouldn't."

"Nice," I said.

Savitri smiled. "If nothing else he keeps me amused. I never know what's going to happen next, but I know I want to find out. Sorry."

"All right, a thirty percent raise," Trujillo said.

"Sold," Savitri said.

"What?" I said.

"I'm kidding," Savitri said. "Idiot."

"Remind me to dock your pay," I said.

"How *are* you going to pay me now, anyway?" Savitri said.

"Look," I said. "Something that needs your attention. Over there. Away from here."

"Hmmmph," Savitri said. She went over to give Trujillo a hug, then jerked a thumb at me. "If things don't work out with this guy, I may come crawling back for my old job."

"It's yours," Trujillo said.

"Excellent," Savitri said. "Because if the last year has taught me anything, it's to have a backup plan." She gave Trujillo another quick hug. "I'm going to go collect Zoë, she said to me. "As soon as you're in the shuttle, we're ready."

"Thanks, Savitri," I said. "I'll be there in a minute. See you then." She squeezed my shoulder and walked off.

"Have *you* said good-bye to everyone you want to?" Trujillo asked.

"I'm doing it now," I said.

Minutes later our shuttle was in the sky, heading toward the *Gentle Star*. Zoë was crying silently, patting Babar and missing her friends.

Jane, sitting next to her, gathered her in a hug. I looked out the porthole as I left behind another world.

"How do you feel?" Jane asked me.

"Sad," I said. "I wanted this to be my world. Our world. Our home. But it wasn't. It's not."

"I'm sorry," Jane said.

"Don't be," I said. I turned and smiled at her. "I'm glad we came. I'm just sad it wasn't to stay."

I turned back to the porthole. The Roanoke sky was fading to black around me.

"This is *your* ship," General Rybicki said to me, motioning around the observation deck he'd just been led into. I had been waiting for him there.

"It is," I said. "For now. You could say we're leasing it. I think it's originally Arrisian, which is some irony for you. It also explains the low ceilings."

"So I should address you as Captain Perry?" Rybicki asked. "That's a step down from your previous rank."

"Actually, Jane's the captain. I'm her nominal superior, but she's in charge of the boat. I think that makes me a commodore. Which is a step up."

"Commodore Perry," Rybicki said. "Catchy. Not very original, I'm afraid."

"I suppose not," I said. I held up the PDA I had in my hand. "Jane called me as you were being led up here. She told me that it had been suggested to you that you might try killing me."

"Christ," Rybicki said. "I'd like to know how she knows these things."

"I hope you're not planning to go through with it," I said. "It's not that you couldn't do it. You're still CDF. You're fast and strong enough to snap my neck before anyone could stop you. But you wouldn't make it out of this room afterward. I don't want you to die."

"I appreciate that," Rybicki said, dryly. Then, "No. I'm not here to kill you. I'm here to try to understand you."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said.

"You can start by telling me why you sent for *me*," Rybicki said. "The Colonial Union has all sorts of diplomats. If the Conclave is going to start a parlay with the CU, that's who should be here talking to you. So I'm wondering why you asked for me."

"Because I felt I owed you an explanation," I said.

"For what?" Rybicki said.

I motioned. "For this," I said. "Why I'm here and not on Roanoke. Or anywhere in the Colonial Union."

"I assumed it was because you didn't want to be tried for treason," Rybicki said.

"There is that," I said. "But that's not it. How are things in the Colonial Union?"

"You're not seriously expecting me to tell you anything *here*," Rybicki said.

"I mean very generally," I said.

"They're fine," Rybicki said. "The Conclave attacks have stopped. Roanoke has been secured and we'll be landing a second wave of colonists there within a month."

"That's ahead of schedule," I said.

"We decided to move quickly there," Rybicki said. "We'll be massively fortifying its defenses as well."

"Good," I said. "A shame that couldn't have happened earlier, before we were attacked."

"Let's not pretend we don't know the whys and wherefores of that," Rybicki said.

"How did the Colonial Union take our victory, incidentally?" I asked.

"It was naturally extremely pleased," Rybicki said.

"Officially, at least," I said.

"You know the Colonial Union," Rybicki said. "The official story is the only story."

"I know," I said. "And that's the reason for all of *this*."

"I'm not following you," Rybicki said.

"Just before our battle with Eser back on Roanoke, you said something to me," I said. "You said that the Colonial Union more than

anyone else was acting in the best interests of humanity."

"I remember that," Rybicki said.

"You were right," I said. "Out of every government or species or intelligent race, the Colonial Union is the one that is the best at looking out for us. For humans. But I've come to doubt that the Colonial Union is doing that job *well*. Look how the Colonial Union treated us at Roanoke. It deceived us in the purpose of colony. It deceived us in the intent of the Conclave. It made us complicit in an act of war that could have destroyed the entire CU. And then it was willing to sacrifice us for the good of humanity. But none of the rest of humanity ever knew the whole story, did they? The Colonial Union controls communication. Controls information. Now that Roanoke survived, the Colonial Union will never tell any of it. No one outside the CU power structure even knows the Conclave exists. *Still*."

"The Colonial Union believed it was necessary to do it that way," Rybicki said.

"I know," I said. "And they've *always* believed it to be necessary to do it that way. You came from Earth, General. You remember how little we knew about out here. How little we knew about the Colonial Union. We signed up for a military we knew nothing about, whose goals we knew nothing of, because we didn't want to die old and alone back at home. We knew that somehow we'd be made young again, and that was enough. It got us here. And that's the Colonial Union way. To tell just enough to achieve a goal. Never more."

"I don't always agree with the Colonial Union's methods," Rybicki said. "You know I disagreed with the CU's plan to cut Roanoke loose. But I'm not sure I'm following you. It would have been disastrous if the Conclave had known of our plans for Roanoke. The Conclave wants to keep humanity boxed up, Perry. It still does. If we don't fight, the rest of the universe gets filled up without us. Humanity dies."

"You're confusing humanity with the Colonial Union," I said. "The Conclave wants to keep the Colonial Union boxed up, because the Colonial Union refuses to join it. But the Colonial Union is not humanity."

"It's a distinction without a difference," Rybicki said.

"True enough," I said. I pointed out the curving window of the observation deck. "You saw the other ships here as you arrived," I said.

"Yes," Rybicki said. "I didn't count them all, but I'm guessing there are four hundred and twelve."

"Close," I said. "Four hundred and thirteen, including this one. Which, incidentally, I've named the *Roanoke*."

"Wonderful," Rybicki said. "The fleet that attacks our next colony world will have an ironic tinge to it."

"The Colonial Union is still planning to colonize, then," I said.

"I'm not going to comment about that to you," Rybicki said.

"If or when the Conclave and the Colonial Union square off again, this ship won't be part of it," I said. "This is a trade ship. So are all the other ships in this fleet. Every ship in this fleet is carrying goods from the race whose ship it is. This took a lot of doing, you should know. It took a couple of months before every race signed on to this. General Gau had to twist a few arms, or whatever. It's easier to get some races to give a warship than a cargo ship filled with goodies."

"If a fleet of warships isn't going to convince the Colonial Union to join the Conclave, I doubt a fleet of trade ships is going to do it either," Rybicki said.

"I think you're right about that," I said, and raised my PDA. "Jane, you can skip now."

"What?" Rybicki said. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I told you," I said. "I'm explaining myself to you."

The *Roanoke* had been floating in space, a prudent distance from any gravity well that might interfere with her Skip Drive. Now Jane gave the order to engage the drive. We punched a hole through space-time and landed somewhere else.

From the observation deck, the difference was not great: One moment we were looking at a random field of stars, and the next, we were looking at another random field of stars. Until we began to see the patterns.

"Look," I said, pointing. "Orion. Taurus. Perseus. Cassiopeia."

"Oh my God," Rybicki said, whispering the words.

The *Roanoke* turned on its axis, and the stars faded out, replaced by the immense glowing orb of a planet, blue and green and white.

"Welcome home, General," I said.

"Earth," Rybicki said, and anything he meant to say after that was lost in his need to stare at the world he left behind.

"You were wrong, General," I said.

It took a second for Rybicki to shake himself out of his reverie. "What?" he said. "Wrong about what?"

"Coventry," I said. "I looked it up. The British knew there was an attack coming. You were right about that. But they didn't know where it would strike. The British didn't sacrifice Coventry. And the Colonial Union shouldn't have been willing to sacrifice Roanoke."

"Why are we here?" Rybicki asked.

"You said it, General," I said. "The Colonial Union will never join the Conclave. But maybe Earth might."

"You're going to take Earth into the Conclave," Rybicki said.

"No," I said. "We're going to offer it a choice. We're going to offer it gifts from each world of the Conclave. And then I'm going to offer it my gift."

"Your gift," Rybicki said.

"The truth," I said. "All of it. About the Colonial Union and about the Conclave and about what happens when we leave our homeworld and come out to the universe. The Colonial Union is free to run its worlds however it wants, General. But *this* world gets to decide for its own. Humanity and the Colonial Union aren't going to be interchangeable anymore. Not after today."

Rybicki looked at me. "You don't have the authority to do this," he said. "To make this decision for all these people."

"I may not have the authority," I said. "But I have the right."

"You don't know what you're doing," Rybicki said.

"I think I do," I said. "I'm changing the world."

Out the window another ship popped into view. I raised my PDA; on the screen was a simple representation of Earth. Around the glowing circle dots appeared, singly, doubly, in groups and in constellations. And when they all arrived, they began broadcasting, all of them, a message of welcome, in as many human languages as could receive them, and a stream of data, unencrypted, catching up Earth on decades of history and technology. The truth, as near as I could tell it. My gift

to the world that had been my home, and which I hoped would be again.

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SIXTEEN

I didn't recognize him at first. Partly this was because of where I was seeing him. It was odd enough that I would be on the steps of the U.S. House of Representatives; to see him there was entirely unexpected. It was also partly because he looked rather older than I remembered him being. And partly because he wasn't green.

"General Szilard," I said. "This is a surprise."

"It was intended to be," he said.

"You look different," I said.

"Yes, well," Szilard said. "Now that the Colonial Union has to deal with human governments here on Earth, one of the things we've discovered is that the politicians here don't take us very seriously if we look like we usually do."

"It's not easy being green," I said.

"Indeed not," Szilard said. "So I've made myself look older and pinker. It seems to be working."

"I assume you're not telling them that you're not old enough to rent a car," I said.

"I don't see the need to confuse them any more than they are," Szilard said. "Do you have a minute? There are things to say."

"I'm done with my testifying for today," I said. "I have time."

Szilard looked around me in an exaggerated fashion. "Where's your mob of reporters?"

"Oh, *that*," I said. "General Gau's testifying before the Senate Intelligence Committee today. I was just talking to a House agricultural

subcommittee. There was a single public access camera there and that was it. It's been months since anyone bothered to follow me around, anyway. Aliens are more interesting."

"How the mighty have fallen," Szilard said.

"I don't mind," I said. "It was nice to be on magazine covers for a while, but it gets old. Do you want to walk?"

"By all means," Szilard said. We set off in the direction of the Mall. Occasionally someone would glance my way—off magazine covers or not, I was still all-too-recognizable—but residents of D.C. were proudly jaded regarding famous politicians, which I now suppose I was, for lack of a better term.

"If you don't mind me asking, General," I said, "why are you here?"

"I'm lobbying senators today," Szilard said. "The U.S. moratorium on CDF recruiting is a problem. The U.S. always accounted for the bulk of our recruits. This was why it was never a problem when other countries forbade their citizens from signing up; their contributions were trivial. But without the U.S. we're not meeting recruitment goals, especially now that so many other countries also have recruiting moratoriums."

"I know about the moratorium," I said. "I'm asking why *you*."

"I seem to be good at speaking the politicians' language," Szilard said. "Apparently there's an advantage around here to being mildly socially retarded, and that's the Special Forces for sure."

"Do you think you'll get the moratorium lifted?" I asked.

Szilard shrugged. "It's complicated," he said. "Everything's complicated because at the end of the day the Colonial Union has kept Earth in the dark for so long. You came along and told everyone here how much they've been missing out on. They're angry. The question is whether they're ultimately angry enough to side with the Conclave instead of other humans."

"When's the vote?" I said.

"Three weeks," Szilard said.

"Should be interesting," I said.

"I understand there's a curse about living in interesting times," Szilard said.

We walked silently for a few minutes.

"What I'm saying to you now comes from me alone," Szilard said. "So we're clear on that."

"All right," I said.

"First, I want to thank you," he said. "I never thought I'd ever get to visit Earth. If you hadn't completely fucked up the Colonial Union's way of doing things, I never would have. So thanks for that."

I found it very difficult to hide my amusement. "You're welcome," I said.

"Second, I need to apologize to you."

"You need to apologize to Jane, General," I said. "She's the one you altered."

"I altered her, but I used you both," Szilard said.

"You said you did it to keep humanity alive," I said. "I'm not thrilled about being used by you or anyone else, but at least I have more sympathy for your goal."

"I wasn't entirely honest with you," Szilard said. "Yes, I worried about the Colonial Union causing the eradication of the human race. Trying to stop that was my primary goal. But I had another goal as well. A selfish goal."

"What is it?" I said.

"Special Forces are second-class citizens in the Colonial Union," Szilard said. "We always have been. We're needed but not trusted. We do the difficult work of keeping the Colonial Union alive—it was we who destroyed the Conclave fleet, but our reward is only more work, more responsibility. I wanted a way to make the Colonial Union recognize *my* people, and how important we are to the Union. And the answer was you."

"Me," I said. "You said that we were chosen because of Jane and Zoë, not me."

"I lied," Szilard said. "You all had your part to play. Jane and Zoë's were the most critical to keeping humanity alive, yes. But your part was critical to *my* goal."

"I don't see how," I said.

"Because you're the one who would get *indignant* at being used," Szilard said. "Lieutenant Sagan no doubt got angry at how she and

Roanoke were manipulated for the Colonial Union's ends. But her solution is to deal directly with the immediate problem. That's how she was trained. Direct-line thinking. Your wife is many things, Perry, but subtle is not one of them. You, on the other hand. You would *stew*. You would look for a long-term solution, to punish those who used you, and to make sure that humanity wouldn't face the same threat twice."

"Bringing the Conclave here to Earth," I said. "Cutting off the Colonial Union's supply of soldiers."

"We saw it as a possibility," Szilard said. "A small one. But a real one. And as a consequence the Colonial Union would need to fall back on its ready source of military power. Us."

"There are always the colonists," I said.

"The colonists haven't fought their own wars for nearly two centuries," Szilard said. "It would be a disaster. Sooner or later it comes down to the Special Forces."

"But you're here lobbying to end the recruiting moratorium," I said.

"The last time we had a conversation I told you the reason I let my Special Forces soldiers be used to destroy the Conclave fleet," Szilard said.

"So you could stay in control of the situation," I said.

Szilard spread his hands as if to say, *And so*.

"I'm having a hard time believing you planned for this," I said.

"I planned none of it," Szilard said. "I left open the possibility it might occur, and was ready to act on it if it did. I certainly didn't expect you to do what you ended up doing. Trade ships. That's weird thinking. I would have expected another armada."

"I'm happy to surprise you," I said.

"I'm sure you are," Szilard said. "And now let me return the favor to you. I know Lieutenant Sagan has yet to forgive me for altering her."

"She hasn't forgiven you," I agreed. "It took her a long time to get used to being human, and you took it away from her."

"Then tell her this," Szilard said. "She was a prototype. A version of Special Forces soldier designed entirely from the human genome. She is one hundred percent human, right down to the number of

chromosomes. She's *better* than human, of course, but human all the same. She never stopped being human through any of this."

"She has a BrainPal in her head," I said.

"We're particularly proud of that," Szilard said. "The most recent generation of BrainPals were largely organic as it was. It took a substantial amount of tweaking to get one to generate out of the human genome. She was the first to have a wholly integrated, human BrainPal."

"Why did you test it on her?" I asked.

"Because I knew she would need it, and I knew she valued her humanity," Szilard said. "I wanted to honor both, and the technology was ready to be tested. Tell her I am sorry I wasn't able to tell her this before now. I had my reasons for not wanting the technology to be common knowledge."

I looked at Szilard closely. "You're using the same technology now, aren't you," I said.

"I am," Szilard said. "For the first time I am entirely human. As human as anyone. And in time every member of Special Forces will be the same. It matters. It matters to who we are, and for what we can become to the Colonial Union and to humanity. Let Jane know, Perry. She is the first of us. The most human of us. Let her know."

Not long after, I took Jane to meet Kathy.

My Ohio hometown was as I had left it, almost two decades before, only slightly worse for wear. We drove up the long driveway of my old house to find my son Charlie, his family and every person I was even tangentially related to waiting for us. I had seen Charlie twice since my return, when he had visited Washington, D.C., to see me. We had been able to get over the shock of me appearing decades younger than he, and he had been able to get over the shock of Jane looking so much like his own mother. For everyone else, however, it was an awkward first.

It would have kept being so if Zoë hadn't dived in and broke the ice, starting with Charlie's son Adam, who Zoë demanded call her "Aunt Zoë," even though she was younger than he was. Slowly our clan began to warm to us, and to me. I was filled in on all the gossip of the last

double decade. Jane was told stories of Kathy she had never known before. Zoë was fussed on by old relatives and moony teenage boys alike. Savitri told Charlie jokes about my days as ombudsman. Hickory and Dickory tolerated being curiosities.

As the sun sank in the sky, Jane and I gave Zoë a quick kiss and slipped away, walking east on my county road to Harris Creek Cemetery, and to the simple marker that held my wife's name.

"Katharine Rebecca Perry," Jane read, kneeling.

"That's right," I said.

"You're crying," Jane said, not looking back. "I can hear it in your voice."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I just never thought I would be back here."

Jane looked back. "I didn't mean for this to hurt you," she said.

"It's all right," I said. "It's supposed to hurt. And I wanted you to meet her. I wanted to be here when you did."

"You still love her," Jane said, looking back down at the marker.

"I do," I said. "I hope you don't mind."

"I'm part of her," Jane said. "She's part of me. When you love her, you love me. I don't mind that you keep loving her. I hope you do. I hope you always do."

I reached out a hand to her; she took it. We stayed that way, silent at my wife's grave, for a very long time.

"Look at the stars," Jane said, finally.

"There's the Big Dipper," I said, pointing.

Jane nodded. "I see it."

I wrapped my arms around Jane. "I remember you said on Huckleberry that it was when you finally saw the constellations that you knew you were home."

"I remember saying that," Jane said.

"Is it still true?" I asked.

"It is," Jane said, and turned to face me. "I'm home. We're home."

I kissed my wife.

"The Milky Way," she said, looking up, after we broke our kiss.

"Yes," I said, looking up myself. "You can see it really well from here. That's one of the reasons I liked living in a little country town. In

the cities the light drowns it out. But here, you can see it. Although I imagine with your eyes, you're getting quite a show."

"It's beautiful," Jane said.

"That reminds me," I said, and told her what General Szilard said about her being the first entirely human Special Forces soldier.

"Interesting," she said.

"So you're completely human after all," I said.

"I know," Jane said. "I figured it out already."

"Really," I said. "I'd like to know how."

"I'm pregnant," Jane said, and smiled.

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The Secret History of The Last Colony

CHAPTER THREE
(of the second iteration of *The Last Colony*, now deceased)

To commemorate the completion of Zoe's Tale, *I thought I'd do something special here for you today and show you something you haven't seen before: An entire excised chapter from one of my books.*

This particular excised chapter comes from an iteration of The Last Colony *that I didn't write (or more accurately, didn't complete): the second iteration, in which I had planned to write the books in alternating chapters of first person and third person, the first person chapters featuring John Perry, the hero of Old Man's War, and the third person chapter featuring other characters, particularly General Tarsem Gau, the leader of the Conclave. Eventually, I abandoned the idea for two reasons: it rapidly became clear it would be a structural nightmare, and also because if I wrote it this way, the book would end up in the 180,000 word range—i.e., I'd have written enough for two books, and would only be paid for one. Bad writer, no cookie.*

I ended up generally abandoning the third person chapters, and rewrote the information in first person chapters for the final version of the book. Only two chapters of this second version made it into the finished book: John Perry's first appearance, which was chapter two, became part of the final book's first chapter, and the chapter in which General Gau argues with a Whaidi colonist leader, which had been the first chapter, turns into Chapter Eight in the final book (and is turned into a video recording, so I could cheat my way into having a third person chapter into a first person book).

Because this is an excised chapter, ***it's not canonical****—among other things, character names change between this and the final version, and General Gau's species name also undergoes a transformation. But neither did the chapter get entirely wasted; it was abandoned not because it wasn't good, but because mechanically it didn't work for the book. So during the writing of the final version of the book, I ended up strip-mining this chapter for material. Folks who have read* The Last Colony *will see things they recognize from different contexts: The video of the Conclave attack on the Whaidi colony, an invocation of a states secret act, and an oblique discussion of Fermi's Paradox, which got a rather more extensive discussion in this excised chapter (because I was annoyed at people who act as if Fermi's Paradox was some sort of immutable law, that's why).*

And as it turns out, I mined it again for part of Zoe's Tale. *You'll have to wait to see which part and how, but the fact that I could (and did) goes to show that nothing has to be wasted. This excised chapter itself will never see the light of day as part of a larger story, but little bits and pieces can be moved around and used and recycled. Waste not, want not.*

It also served another purpose: This chapter is basically me thinking out loud about several characters in The Last Colony, *and figuring out their personalities and what makes them tick. This chapter became back story for several characters, notably Generals Rybicki and Gau; playing with them here gave me a good idea who they were when I started writing them for the final version of* The Last Colony. *It's good to have that sort of grip on your characters before you start putting canonical words into their mouths.*

The lesson here for writing is that even your "failures"—the stuff that doesn't work for your book, for whatever reason—can still have value to you as you're wrestling with your work. This is one reason way, whenever I chop out a significant chunk of text from a book I'm writing, I don't simply delete it: I cut it and paste it into an "excisions" document that I keep handy. That way I can go back to that material for reference, or to drop a line or an idea into the final version, perhaps in a completely different context, but

where it will do some real good. This is what I do, and it's worked for me so far.

■

Colonel Janice Dunn, General George Rybicki's assistant, found the general in a conference theater. He was walking around in a massive projection of local space, stars glowing different colors to signify which races' colonies lived around them. "General," she began.

"Shhh," Rybicki said, and pointed at the stars. "Looking."

"Secretary Bell's office sent a message," Dunn said, ignoring her superior's order to shush. "Your presence is requested for a meeting in ten minutes."

"She probably wants an update on Roanoke," Rybicki said. "I've got colony leaders for her now."

"You should take a few minutes to prepare," Dunn suggested.

"I already have a report ready," Rybicki said. "I'll be fine." We went back to staring up at the projection.

"If you wanted to look at the stars, you could have just looked out a window," Dunn said.

Rybicki snorted. "Shows how often you actually look out a window," he said. "All the stars get washed out by Phoenix. And when you're on a part of this station that's pointed away from the planet, all the station's exterior lights throw up too much glare." He pointed up at the display. "This is as good as starwatching gets around here. And anyway, I'm not actually stargazing, I'm thinking."

"About what?" Dunn asked.

"Fermi's Paradox," Rybicki said.

Dunn frowned. "I'm not familiar with that," she said. "Is that some physics thing?"

"It's an extraterrestrial thing," Rybicki said, and pointed again at the display. "Fermi lived before we knew about all this. He didn't believe that intelligent life existed anywhere but on Earth. He said, 'if they exist, why aren't they here already?' And no one had a good answer for that. So they speculated that maybe the aliens couldn't travel fast enough to get to Earth, or maybe they were out there, but they were

just waiting until humans were sufficiently advanced before admitting them into some federation of worlds. Crap like that. But none of them ever figured out the real reason."

"Which was?" Dunn asked.

"That they were all too busy beating the Hell out of each other to bother with us," Rybicki said. "They didn't get to us because they occupied themselves with worlds they already knew about. Our research arm's done some archaeology here and there, whenever we take a planet from someone else. You want to know the average lifespan of a colony—any colony, by any species? Try and guess."

"I can't imagine," Dunn said.

"75 years," Rybicki said. "A race finds a planet, sets up shop, has some relatively peaceful decades, gets complacent, and then some other race comes in and wipes the floor with them, and then that species colonizes the planet. The cycle starts over. Wash, rinse, repeat. Some colony planets have gone back and forth dozens of times. Just about the only planets that ever stay the same over any length of time are species home planets, because they're usually too well-populated and defended to pry a species off of. Everything else is constantly up for grabs."

"And yet we have colonies that have been around for a couple of centuries," Dunn said.

"Yes, well, we game the system," Rybicki said. "We've made Phoenix humanity's homeworld for all intents and purposes, so that's a colony that's staying put. And we populate our colony worlds faster than most species, because we have a planet overflowing with extra people. Why grow a colony slowly when you can flood it with waves of surplus Pakistanis and Norwegians and Egyptians?"

"I'm pretty sure the colonists wouldn't appreciate being called 'surplus,' " Dunn said.

"I'm sure they wouldn't," Rybicki said. "Doesn't mean they're not. And we're glad for it because it makes it easier to keep a foothold. The last old colony we lost was Coral, and that was because we had less than 100,000 colonists on it. We took it back quickly enough, but you see the point. Were you around for Coral?"

"I think I was still in London at the time," Dunn said. "Old and fat and hoping I didn't die before I could get off the planet."

"Congratulations," Rybicki said. "You made it."

"Thank you, general," Dunn said.

"You're welcome," Rybicki said, and with his BrainPal caused the human colony stars to shine a little brighter. "We have a lot of old colonies, but we still lose a fair number of new colonies. You've read the report on Everest colony."

"I did," Dunn said. "But Everest wasn't lost because of attack."

"No," Rybicki agreed. "Although a colony-wide bacterial plague isn't a much better way to die. Point is, even we conform to the 75-year rule. It's interesting."

"If you say so, general," Dunn said, and pointed at the stars. "One wonders at how the Conclave will change that average for us."

"Shhhhh," Rybicki said again, sarcasm whistling out. "We're still not supposed to admit that the Conclave exists. It's still a state secret."

"It's a very poorly-kept secret," Dunn said. "You can go down to the promenade and hear the soldiers talking about it."

"State secrets are always poorly kept," Rybicki said. "Yet they still manage to stay secrets. Officially, at least. CDF grunts can talk about the Conclave all they want. What matters is the colonies. We still haven't explained it them. They still don't know."

"Or don't want to know," Dunn said.

Rybicki nodded. "Always a possibility. But then, there's a lot we don't know, either." A star in the array growed more bright; the star around which the colony of Roanoke would be founded. "Everest aside, Roanoke will be our first colony after the Conclave came together. Our first test to see whether the Conclave intends to enforce its ban on colonization from non-Conclave races."

"You don't seem worried," Dunn said.

"That's not entirely accurate," Rybicki said. "I'm concerned, but a lot depends on the Conclave itself. Everest was out there and they didn't do anything about it. Was it because the Conclave was still getting itself together, or because they were simply rattling their sabers and hoping we'd be scared? We're not the only ones who have colonized between now and then. The question now is how much of a priority we are to the Conclave. Or if we're a priority at all."

"What I want to know is when we will finally go after the humans," said Lernin Il, once again. And once again, after a moment for the translation into a dozen languages, came the affirmative nods, bobbles, and signifying appendage movement from around the council table.

General Gau struggled mightily not to sigh in exasperation at the Tand member of the Conclave's executive council, and lightly tapped the table instead. "There is the small problem that the humans have no colonies founded after the Agreement, Counselor Il," he said.

"There's the colony they call Everest," Il said.

"There was the colony they called Everest," Gau said. "It was wiped out by a native infection. Since then there have been no other attempts by the humans to start a new colony."

"The fact Everest was colonized should be enough," said Wert Ninug, the Dward counselor, and Gau tucked away for future reference that sometime between the time he'd left on his mission to the Whaidian colony and the time he'd gotten back the Dward had somehow slipped into the pocket of the Tand. That was interesting; the two races had a hate that went back hundreds of shar. Prior to this even if Wert had agreed with Il on a policy issue, it would have rather shot off the back of its own head then to say it publicly.

You wanted races to put away their old hates, some part of Gau's mind said to him, and Gau had to note the comment with rueful satisfaction. He did want the members of the Conclave to get over their past enmities; he wasn't entirely sure he wanted them to start new ones against him.

Gau glanced down the table to see who looked surprised at a Dward offering support for a Tand. It would be the ones who didn't look surprised that Gau would need to worry about.

"Should it, Counselor Wert?" Gau said, presently. "The Agreement limits non-Conclave races to worlds they already have. Currently the humans are on the worlds they had prior to the agreement. Where should we attack?"

"They did colonize after the agreement," Wert said. "They intentionally tested the will of the Conclave. Intent should matter for something."

"I agree," Gau said. "However, at the moment we have no avenue to respond. Everest was abandoned. All the other worlds the humans have we have all agreed they have a right to live on. And the Conclave is not meant to be merely an instrument of retribution or of punishment."

"You had no problems punishing the Whaid," Il said.

Gau paused a prudent moment before responding. "No, I didn't," he said, finally. "Nor will I the humans. When and if the humans attempt to colonize again."

"We could make a special case out of the humans," said Hafte Sorvalh, the Lalan Counselor. She was not an ally of either Il or Wert, so far as Gau knew. "One could argue their past actions merit a certain level of special attention."

"In my experience today's 'special attention' is tomorrow's standard procedure, counselor Sorvalh," Gau said. "And this is not a standard procedure I think the Conclave should feel comfortable having. We are so early in time of this union of ours. We should not begin its time by compromising its laws, simply out of convenience."

"We could change the law," said Il. More agreement around the table.

"We could," Gau agreed. "This executive council was empowered to do so. Each of you was elected among the governments of the Conclave to represent their interests. So yes, we could change the law. And then we could watch as Conclave members peel themselves away and form new alliances, because this council will have shown that we have no interest in creating the universe we said we were interested in living in. I don't think we should be in a rush to dissolve the thing we're supposed to guide. Do you?"

"You know the humans are dangerous," Wert said. "They were the movers behind the Counter Conclave. They nearly wrecked the Conclave before it even began. We're sitting here being judicious in our response to them, but you know as well as any of us, General Gau, that the humans are not returning the favor to us."

"I'm not suggesting we ignore the humans, Counselor Wert," Gau said. "Nor do I think it's in the nature of the humans not to test our will. We will no doubt have an opportunity to face them again, and I

suspect we will, sooner rather than later. What I suggest we remember, however, that the Conclave is more than the sum of its military might. We have other ways to discover the intent and the capabilities of the humans, other tools at our disposal. We want to create the circumstances in which the humans make their move, and we are able to respond—in our way, by our own laws."

"Just as we would with any other race," Sorvalh said.

"Precisely," Gau said. "If we make a special case of the humans, we give them significance, and we diminish the Conclave by saying that we have to work outside our own laws to contain them. We give them power, which will attract others to them. We make it harder to defeat them. I'd prefer not to do that. When we defeat the humans, we want that defeat to be unremarkable. They will be just another race, isolated and alone, no longer a threat to anyone, much less the Conclave."

The beams of light illuminating the Whaidian colony suddenly snapped off. General Rybicki felt the confusion in the room over that; the video in the room had begun with the colony swathed in light, and most people assumed that the beams would eventually focus into lethality. Shutting them off seemed unnecessarily cruel.

"Here it comes," said Secretary of Defense Anthony Crane, who had seen the video before.

The killing beams were initially hardly detectable, with just the errant occasional flash of an airborne dust mote igniting to suggest the beams were there. But within a fraction of a second the entire colony ignited and exploded, and superheated air blew the fragments and the dust of the colony's buildings, structures, vehicles and inhabitants up into the sky in a whirling display that illuminated the power of the beams themselves. The flickering fragments of matter mimicked and mirrored the flames that were now themselves reaching up toward the heavens.

A shockwave of heat and dust expanded out from the charred remains of the colony. The beams flicked off again. The light-show in the sky disappeared, leaving behind smoke and flames. Outside the

periphery of the destruction, an occasional solitary eruption of flame would appear.

"What is that?" asked Karin Bell, the Secretary of Colonization.

"Some of the colonists were outside the colony when it was destroyed, we think" said Crane. "So they're cleaning them up."

"Christ," Bell said. "With the colony destroyed those people would probably be dead anyway."

"They were making a point," Crane said.

"Point taken," Bell said. "Lights, please."

The video shut off; Rybicki felt the tension in his shoulders uncoil.

The lights came up to reveal a room jammed with people: Crane and Bell with their assistants and staff; Rybicki and several other generals and admirals with theirs. The general officers and the secretaries sat at the circular table; the staff members milled up against the walls.

The meeting was rather more packed, and packed with different people, than Rybicki had expected it to be. Rybicki had walked into room prepared for a status update meeting on Roanoke; he was going to discuss John Perry and Jane Sagan agreeing to lead the colony. That was not this meeting.

"How did we get hold of this video?" asked Charlie Garr, Bell's chief of staff. "Who do we have working inside the Conclave that can get us something like this?"

Crane cracked a bitter smile. "You're making the assumption that the Conclave doesn't want us to see this, Charlie," he said. "But you'd be wrong about that. This video was hand-delivered to us, and to every non-Conclave-affiliated government, by messengers from the Conclave itself."

"I don't understand," Garr said.

"The Conclave has decided that races who aren't in the Conclave can't colonize any more," Crane said. "We knew that already, of course. Only now, it's clear the Conclave is intending to enforce that decision. If we try to colonize, that's what's going to happen to all of our new colonies." Crane pointed toward where the video had just been playing. "This is their way of making sure we know they're serious about their policy positions."

"This really happened, then," Colonel Dunn asked, behind Rybicki. "I mean, this isn't an archive video from some attack in the past."

"Along with the video, the Conclave gave us the coordinates of the colony—the former colony—and a three-day window to confirm for ourselves that the attack happened," Crane said. "We checked. It happened, Colonel."

"What colonies of ours are at risk?" Bell asked.

Crane nodded to his own chief of staff, Lance Wantanabe. "Theoretically, none," he said. "The Conclave is targeting colonies established after it was founded. That was almost two years ago. We established the Everest colony, but it didn't stick. As long as the Conclave stays within its own laws, we won't be a target until we try to found a new colony."

"Which we intend to do," Rybicki said. As he said it he realized he wasn't entirely sure whether he meant it as a statement or a question.

"Why did they take so long to start going after new colonies?" Bell asked.

"There are over four hundred races in the Conclave," Wantanabe said. "If they're anything like us, coordinating anything substantial is going to take time. They had to get their own government up and running and stable before they could worry about anyone else. We and at least a couple dozen other races took advantage of that time to found new colonies, but now it looks like the Conclave is determined to back up its threat."

"But that can be to our advantage," Crane said. "The Conclave is going to be busy policing the colonies that were founded in its wake. That gives us time to plan our attack."

This got Rybicki's attention. " 'Our attack?' " he said. "You're suggesting that the Colonial Union can go up against the Conclave."

"I am, General," asked Crane. "Do you think otherwise?"

"As a practical matter, there are 400 races in the Conclave, and one of us," Rybicki said. "That is not an insignificant matter of scale."

"I agree, but I don't think we really have much of a choice in that matter," Crane said. "Unless we are willing to join the Conclave, which we are not, or are willing not to colonize, which we are not, the alternative is to fight the Conclave and destroy it."

"I'm not disputing that these are our options," Rybicki said. "I'm simply not sure how we go up against an enemy like that and not get ourselves slaughtered."

"Start by changing your frame of reference," said a voice down the table. Rybicki turned to see General Szilard, head of Special Forces, staring back at him with that disturbingly blank expression the Special Forces had. "You've made the mistake of taking the Conclave at its word, General Rybicki. You're seeing as it would like to position itself to the non-affliated races. Monolithic. Coordinated. Unstoppable and inevitable."

"The video we just saw makes a good case for that," Rybicki said.

"That was the point, of course," Szilard said. "What the Conclave doesn't want you to see is that it's young, uncertain and filled with political and social faultlines that we can exploit and use to bring it down. It's a little like a diamond, general. You can't wear down a diamond. But you can shatter a diamond to dust if you just know where to hit it. We can't go against the Conclave head-to-head. You're right about that. But we can destroy it. All we need is the right tool, used at the right time."

"And what tool might that be?" Rybicki asked.

Szilard looked over to Crane.

"All right, everyone," Crane said. "Let's make this official. This meeting and everything said and done in it is covered by the Colonial Union State Secrets Act. Nothing leaves this room. General Szilard, you have the floor."

"Thank you, Secretary Crane," Szilard said. "I'm going to keep this simple. The way to defeat the Conclave is to play by its rules." From the video output a picture flickered into existence, showing a thin, pale creature.

"For those of you who don't know, this is Tarsem Gau, leader of the Conclave," Szliard said. "He's a general for the Tsideian race, or was a general, anyway, and still refers to himself that way, although of course he is the de facto leader of that planet as well as of the Conclave. Despite the power that devolves to him alone, Gau is, as far as we can tell, a creature who is genuinely trying to create a lasting political

structure and not a prop for his own cult of personality. He's nation-building."

"That's optimism for you," Crane said, as a joke. No one laughed.

"Because of that, our intelligence people suggest he is extraordinarily sensitive to making sure that nothing the Conclave does is above its own laws," Szilard continued. "This means we believe that the Colonial Union will not be attacked until and unless we attempt to found a new colony—and that the Conclave will only attack that colony."

"That means that any new colony we found is going to find the entire Conclave in its sky before it even has time to dig in," said Secretary Bell.

"It means, Secretary Bell, that by following the rules the Conclave has established, we will choose the place and time for our confrontation," General Szilard said. "And that if we do things right, we can weaken the Conclave along the way so that when the confrontation happens, we can strike a fatal blow."

"And what will 'doing things right' take?" Bell asked.

"No more than what we already have planned," Szilard said. "General Rybicki."

"Yes?" Rybicki said.

"I believe that when you came to this meeting today, you were going to provide Secretary Bell with a status update on the Roanoke Colony. Now would be an excellent time to give it."

After the council meeting, Hafte Sorvalh asked for a private audience. Gau, though tired, invited her back to his personal office. He was amused when the Lalan, tall even for her own tall race, tried to be diplomatic about its size.

"This is cozy," she said.

Gau laughed, as he sat. "You mean to say it's impossibly cramped. Please, sit, Counselor Sorvalh."

She sat. "I don't mean any disrespect. I assumed your own office would be larger than this."

"I have the large public office for meetings, and to impress people when I have to, of course," Gau said. "I'm not blind to the power of impressive spaces. But I've spent most of my life on starships, even after I began to build the Conclave. You get used to not a lot of space. I'm more comfortable here. And no one can say that I give more to myself than any other counselor on the executive committe."

"Indeed," Sorvalh said. "You are almost arrogant in your humility, general. If you don't mind me saying."

"I don't," Gau said. "But we can always go to my public office if you prefer."

"I'm fine," Sorvalh said. "It actually is cozy."

"Thank you, Counselor," Gau said. "Now, please. What's on your mind."

"I'm speaking here primarily for myself," Sorvalh said.

"All right," Gau said.

"I'm worried about certain influences on the executive council," Sorvalh said.

"Ah," Gau said. "This wouldn't have anything to do with the strange, sudden marriage of convenience between counselors Il and Wert, would it?"

"You have to admit they make an unusual pair of allies," Sorvalh said.

"I admit it," Gau said. "I also suspect there is more going on there than either of them would like for me to know about. Suffice to say that I'm already going to be looking into it. But in itself, I'm not entirely sure I should express too much concern. There are a dozen members of the executive council for a reason. To make sure there are a multiplicity of voices, and not all of them telling me what I want to hear."

"I appreciate that," Sorvalh said. "I have taken advantage of that freedom myself. But—with all respect—when others of us have disagreed with you, we've still kept the interests of the Conclave at the heart of the matter."

"You doubt our two friends are doing that?" Gau asked.

"I can't say for sure," Sorvalh said. "I can say that your destruction of that Whadian colony has motivated them and others. Before you did

it, the matter of the Conclave's military might was entirely theoretical. There was no Conclave military might, just an agreement that if it was used, it should be used in particular ways.

"But now there is a Conclave military, and you've consecrated its use against the Conclave enemies. Composing it of soldiers and ships of every Conclave member was your way of assuring responsibility for its use was shared by all. I suspect some are beginning to wonder if the converse is true—by spreading responsibility around you spread it thin enough that no one has to take responsibility for anything. And that's an inviting proposition when you have enemies on a list."

"Inviting enough to put one's own interests first," Gau said.

"Perhaps," Sorvalh said. "Allow me to suggest that today's attempt to get you to attack the humans was less about the humans than it was a probe to see how flexible you are with your power. The humans are an easy target. They have no friends, and everyone knows they mean us harm. But as you said to me, today's special case is tomorrow's standard practice."

"I thought you might be testing me with that," Gau said.

"Testing you? Oh, no," Sorvalh said. "Merely providing you with an opportunity to make a point. And I was pleased to see you take advantage of the opportunity."

"I'm happy to please you, counselor," Gau said.

"Then perhaps you'll consider something else that might please me—and a few others on the council," Sorvalh said. "I and others are gratified that through the many shars it took to create the Conclave, you have always avoided assuming the powers you could have easily assumed. Time and again you showed that your interest was not in personal power, but in building a lasting peace. But now the Conclave is here, and I wonder whether the democratic impulses that led to its creation might not undermine it as you attempt to bring the remaining races into the fold."

"You think I give the executive council too much say," Gau said.

"I think the executive council was useful when the Conclave was being born," Sorvalh said. "I wonder if it will continue to be useful as we progress."

"I think it will be," Gau said.

"Perhaps it will," Sorvalh said. "But you should know that when we Lalans chose to join the Conclave, it wasn't an executive council we trusted to achieve peace. It was you, General Gau. You and your vision."

"But part of that vision was the idea that not too much power should rest in any one person, even me," General Gau said. "I want to lead the Conclave, make no mistake about that. My arrogance extends that far. But I don't want to do it as an emperor or a tyrant. Empires fall and tyrannies collapse. I'm hoping for something more than that."

"People might be suspicious of someone who doesn't want power for himself," Sorvalh said. "It's not normal."

Gau smiled. "I'm not pure, counselor," he said. "I have a the usual amount of personal vanities and flaws. And I enjoy running things. But I hope that if I had to choose between my personal power and the well-being of the Conclave, I could pick the Conclave. So far, it's been easy for me to say I would pick the Conclave. But I dread the temptation of picking myself. It would be easier. If nothing else, the executive council keeps me from having to make that choice."

"Then I hope for your sake you never have to choose between one or the other," Sorvalh said.

"Thank you, counselor," Gau said. "I appreciate the thought. There's little worse in life than a choice you suffer for. Whatever choice I would make in that situation, I would surely suffer, believe me."

Colonel Dunn found General Rybicki alone in the conference theater, staring again at the projection of local space.

"You were right," Dunn said. "I tried looking out the window at the stars. I couldn't see a single one of them."

"Well, they're all here," Rybicki said, waving dismissively at the display. "All the ones that matter, anyway. All the fucking stars with all the fucking intelligent races around them. Here they are, Colonel. Enjoy them."

"I was going to ask you if you were all right," Dunn said. "But I suspect I already know the answer to that."

"I'm fine," Rybicki said. "I may be slightly drunk and pissed off, however. I'm entitled."

"There's a chance they could change the strategy," Dunn said. "General Szilard said that there was still some work to be done on the details."

"Don't kid yourself, Colonel," Rybicki said. "Szilard is Special Forces. Special Forces are bred to be heartless sons of bitches. And he certainly did his job. The strategy is done. They'll tweak here and there for maximum effect. But we're moving forward, all right."

"But it's not just Special Forces on this," Dunn said. "The Secretary of Defense signed off on it. So did the Secretary of Colonization. So did you."

"Yes, I did," Rybicki said. "I sure did. And I will tell you that when I did, I suddenly got religion. At that moment, Colonel, I became convinced there an afterlife, because I became stone cold aware that I was going to Hell."

"General," Dunn began.

"Thank you, Colonel, that will be all," Rybicki said. "You're dismissed. Go away."

Colonel Dunn left. Rybicki turned his attention back to the display and watched the stars wheel around an arbitrary central axis.

"Goddamn Enrico Fermi," Rybicki said, after a while. "Why couldn't you have been right."

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Acknowledgments

With this book we've reached the end of our journeys with John Perry and Jane Sagan. I like to think they go on. But they go on without us. It's possible I'll return one day to this universe, to explore other corners of it, and to see how it has changed through the events of this book. For the moment, however, I'm stepping back, to explore other places and people. I hope you don't mind.

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During the writing of the *The Last Colony* I was nominated for and won the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer in science fiction. I was nominated with Sarah Monette, Chris Roberson, Brandon Sanderson, K. J. Bishop and Steph Swainston, and was fortunate enough to become friends with Sarah, Chris and Brandon. The suggestion that I'm a better writer than any of these folks is a flattering lie, and I encourage you to look up their work the next time you're in a bookstore or book-buying online. You won't be disappointed.

I killed off a character named Joseph Loong in this book; the real Joseph Loong, with whom I work at AOL, I wish a long and happy life, and I thank him for letting me use his name. Lieutenant Stross in the book is an obvious tuckerization of Charles Stross, the unspeakably talented science fiction writer, and also a friend of mine. The real Stross is not as spacey as the one I put in the book. General Rybicki is named for Joe Rybicki, my longtime friend and editor. I hope he likes his character.

Yet again, many thanks to Regan Avery, who continues to be my frontline reader, and helps make my books better. She's been my frontline reader for a decade now; I consider her my lucky charm.

Finally, thanks to Kristine and Athena Scalzi, my wife and daughter, respectively, and especially to Kristine. Those people who know Kristine and me have suggested that Jane Sagan is rather obviously modeled after Kristine. There is only so far the comparison goes—as far as I know my wife has not taken out entire platoons of soldiers armed only with knives—but it is a fact that Jane's intelligence, strength and personal character are based on my wife's own intelligence, strength and personal character. To be blunt about it, my wife totally rocks. She also is kind enough not only to put up with me but to encourage me, support me and love me. I am lucky to be with her. I dedicate this entire series to her—*Old Man's War, The Ghost Brigades* and *The Last Colony*. These are her books. I just wrote them.

JOHN SCALZI
September 20, 2006

OceanofPDF.com

ZOE'S TALE

John Scalzi

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

OceanofPDF.com

For Karen Meisner and Anne KG Murphy
And most especially for Athena.

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Prologue

I lifted up my dad's PDA and counted off the seconds with the two thousand other people in the room.

"Five! Four! Three! Two! One!"

And then there was no noise, because everyone's attention—and I mean *everyone's*—was glued to the monitors peppered around the *Magellan*'s common area. The screens, which had held starry skies in them, were blank and black, and everyone was holding their breath, waiting for what came next.

A world appeared, green and blue.

And we all went *insane*.

Because it was *our* world. It was Roanoke, our new home. We would be the first people to land there, the first people to settle there, the first people to live our lives there. And we celebrated seeing it for that first time, we two thousand settlers of Roanoke, all crammed into that common area, hugging and kissing and singing "Auld Lang Syne," because, well, what else do you sing when you come to a new world? A new world, new beginnings, a new year, a new life. New everything. I hugged my best friend Gretchen and we hollered into the microphone I had been using to count down the seconds, and hopped up and down like idiots.

When we stopped hopping, a whisper in my ear. "So beautiful," Enzo said.

I turned to look at him, at this gorgeous, beautiful boy who I was seriously considering making my boyfriend. He was a perfect combination: heart-flutteringly pretty and apparently entirely ignorant of the fact, because he'd been spending the last week trying to charm me with his *words,* of all things. Words! Like he didn't get the teenage boy manual on how to be completely inarticulate around girls.

I appreciated the effort. And I appreciated the fact that when he whispered his words, he was looking at me and not the planet. I glanced over at my parents about six meters away, kissing to celebrate the arrival. That seemed like a good idea. I reached my hand behind Enzo's head to draw him to me and planted one right on his lips. Our first kiss. New world, new life, new boyfriend.

What can I say. I was caught up in the moment.

Enzo didn't complain. " 'O brave new world, that has such people in it,' " he said, after I let him breathe again.

I smiled at him, my arms still around his neck. "You've been saving that up," I said.

"Maybe," he admitted. "I wanted you to have a quality first kiss moment."

See. Most sixteen-year-old boys would have used a kiss as an excuse to dive straight for the boobs. He used it as an excuse for Shakespeare. A girl could do worse.

"You're adorable," I said, kissed him again, then gave him a playful push and launched myself into my parents, breaking up their canoodling and demanding their attention. The two of them were our colony's leaders, and soon enough they would barely have time to breathe. It was best I get in some quality time while I could. We hugged and laughed and then Gretchen yanked me back toward her.

"Look what I have," she said, and thrust her PDA in my face. It showed a vidcap of me and Enzo kissing.

"You evil little *thing*," I said.

"It's amazing," Gretchen said. "It actually looks like you're trying to swallow his entire *face*."

"Stop it," I said.

"See? Look," Gretchen tapped a button, and the vidcap played in slow motion. "Right there. You're *mauling* him. Like his lips were made of *chocolate*."

I was trying very hard not to laugh, because she was actually right about that. "Wench," I said. "Give me that." I snatched the PDA from her with one hand, erased the file, and handed it back. "There. Thank you."

"Oh, no," Gretchen said, mildly, taking the PDA.

"Learned your lesson about violating the privacy of others?" I said.

"Oh, yes," Gretchen said.

"Good," I said. "Of course, you already forwarded it to everyone we know before you showed it to me, didn't you?"

"Maybe," Gretchen said, and put her hand to her mouth, eyes wide.

"Evil," I said, admiringly.

"Thank you," Gretchen said, and curtsied.

"Just remember I know where you live," I said.

"For the rest of our lives," Gretchen said, and then we did embarrassingly girly squeals and had another hug. Living the rest of your life with the same two thousand people ran the risk of being dead-bang boring, but not with Gretchen around.

We unhugged and then I looked around to see who else I wanted to celebrate with. Enzo was hovering in the background, but he was smart enough to know that I'd get back to him. I looked over and saw Savitri Guntupalli, my parents' assistant, conferring with my dad very seriously about something. Savitri: She was smart and capable and could be wicked funny, but she was always working. I got between her and Dad and demanded a hug. Yes, I was all about the hugs. But, you know, look: You only get to see your new world for the first time once.

"Zoë," Dad said, "can I have my PDA back?"

I had taken Dad's PDA because he'd set the exact time the *Magellan* would skip from the Phoenix system to Roanoke, and used it to count off the last few minutes before the jump. I had my own PDA, of course; it was in my pocket. No doubt the vidcap of me smooching Enzo was waiting for me in my in-box, just like it was in the in-boxes of all our friends. I made a note to myself to plot revenge against Gretchen. Sweet, merciless revenge. Involving witnesses. And farm animals. But for now I gave Dad back his PDA, gave him a peck on his cheek, and found my way back to Enzo.

"So," Enzo said, and smiled. God, he was even charming when monosyllabic. The rational part of my brain was lecturing me about how infatuation makes everything seem better than it is; the irrational part (meaning, most of me) was telling the rational part to get well and truly stuffed.

"So," I said back, not nearly as charmingly, but Enzo didn't seem to notice.

"I was talking to Magdy," Enzo said.

"Uh-oh," I said.

"Magdy's not so bad," Enzo said.

"Sure, for certain values of 'not so bad,' meaning '*bad,*' " I said.

"And he said that he was talking to some of the *Magellan* crew," Enzo said, forging along (charmingly). "They told him about an observation lounge on the crew level that's usually empty. He says we could get a great view of the planet there."

I glanced over Enzo's shoulder, where Magdy was talking animatedly to Gretchen (or *at* her, depending on one's point of view). "I don't think the planet is what he's hoping to view," I said.

Enzo glanced back. "Maybe not," he said. "Although to be fair to Magdy, certain people aren't exactly trying hard not to be viewed."

I crooked an eyebrow at that; it was true enough, although I knew Gretchen was more into the flirting than anything else. "And what about you?" I said. "What are *you* hoping to see?"

Enzo smiled and held up his hands, disarmingly. "Zoë," he said. "I just got to *kiss* you. I think I want to work on that a little more before moving on to anything else."

"Ooh, nicely said," I said. "Do these lines work on all the girls?"

"You're the first girl I've tried them on," Enzo said. "So you'll have to let me know."

I actually blushed, and gave him a hug. "So far, so good," I said.

"Good," Enzo said. "Also, you know. I've seen your bodyguards. I don't think I want them to use me for target practice."

"What?" I said, mock-shocked. "You're not frightened of Hickory and Dickory, are you? They're not even here." Actually, Enzo has a perfectly good reason to be utterly terrified of Hickory and Dickory, who were already vaguely suspicious of him and would happily cycle him out an airlock if he did anything stupid with me. But there was no reason to let him know that yet. Good rule of thumb: When your relationship is minutes old, don't freak out the new squeeze.

And anyway, Hickory and Dickory were sitting out this celebration. They were aware they made most of the humans nervous.

"I was actually thinking of your parents," Enzo said. "Although they seem to be missing, too." Enzo motioned with his head to where John and Jane had been standing a few minutes before; now neither of them were there. I saw Savitri leaving the common area as well, as if she suddenly had someplace to be.

"I wonder where they went," I said, mostly to myself.

"They're the colony leaders," Enzo said. "Maybe now they have to start working."

"Maybe," I said. It was unusual for either John or Jane to disappear without telling me where they were going; it was just a common courtesy. I fought back the urge to message them on my PDA.

"So, the observation lounge," Enzo said, getting himself back to the topic at hand. "You want to check it out?"

"It's on the crew deck," I said. "You think we might get in trouble?"

"Maybe," Enzo said. "But what can they do? Make us walk the plank? At worst they'll just tell us to get lost. And until then we'll have a heck of a view."

"All right," I said. "But if Magdy turns into all tentacles, I'm leaving. There are some things I don't need to see."

Enzo laughed. "Fair enough," he said, and I snuggled into him a little. This new boyfriend thing was turning out just fine.

We spent some more time celebrating with our friends and their families. Then, after things had settled down enough, we followed Magdy and Gretchen through the *Magellan* and toward the crew observation lounge. I thought sneaking into the crew area might be a problem; not only was it easy, but a crew member coming out of an entrance held it open for us.

"Security is not a huge issue here on the *Magellan,*" Gretchen said, back to me and Enzo, then looked down at our clasped hands and smiled at me. She was evil, sure, but she was also happy for me.

The observation lounge was where it was advertised to be, but alas for Magdy's nefarious plans, it was not empty as promised; four *Magellan* crew members sat at a table, intent in a conversation. I glanced over to Magdy, who looked like he had just swallowed a fork. I

found this rather amusing myself. Poor, poor Magdy. Frustration became him.

"Look," Enzo said, and still holding my hand, guided me to a huge observation window. Roanoke filled the view, gorgeously green, fully illuminated with her sun behind us, more breathtaking in person than she was on the monitors. Seeing something with your own eyes makes a difference.

It was the most beautiful thing I think I'd ever seen. *Roanoke*. Our world.

"Wrong *place,*" I heard, barely, from the conversation at the table to the left of me.

I glanced over at the table. The four *Magellan* crew there were so engaged in their conversation and so closed in to each other that it looked like most of their bodies were actually on the table rather than in their seats. One of the crew was sitting with his back to me, but I could see the other three, two men and a woman. The expression on their faces was grim.

I have a habit of listening in to other people's conversations. It's not a bad habit unless you get caught. The way not to get caught is to make sure it looks like your attention is somewhere else. I dropped my hand from Enzo's and took a step toward the observation lounge window. This got me closer to the table while at the same time keeping Enzo from whispering sweet nothings in my ear. I kept myself visually intent on Roanoke.

"You don't just *miss,*" one of the crew members was saying. "And the *captain* sure as hell doesn't. He could put the *Magellan* in orbit around a pebble if he wanted to."

The crew member with his back to me said something low, which I couldn't hear.

"That's *crap,*" said the first crew member. "How many ships have actually gone missing in the last twenty years? In the last fifty? No one gets *lost* anymore."

"What are you thinking?"

I jumped, which made Enzo jump. "Sorry," he said, as I turned to give him an exasperated look. I put a finger to my lips to shush him, and then motioned with my eyes at the table now behind me. Enzo

glanced behind me and saw the table. *What?* he mouthed. I shook my head a tiny bit to tell him he shouldn't distract me anymore. He gave me a strange look. I took his hand again to let him know I wasn't upset with him, but then focused my attention back to the table.

"—calm. We don't know anything yet," said another voice, this one belonging (I think) to the woman. "Who else knows about this?"

Another mutter from the crew member facing away from me.

"Good. We need to keep it that way," she said. "I'll clamp down on things in my department if I hear anything, but it only works if we all do it."

"It won't stop the crew from talking," said someone else.

"No, but it'll slow down the rumors, and that's good enough until we know what's really happened," the woman said.

Yet another mutter.

"Well, if it's true, then we have bigger problems, don't we?" said the woman, and all the strain she was experiencing was suddenly clear in her voice. I shuddered a little; Enzo felt it through my hand and looked at me, concerned. I gave him a serious hug. It meant losing the rest of the conversational thread, but at the moment, it's what I wanted. Priorities change.

There was the sound of chairs pushing back. I turned and the crew members—it was pretty clear they were actually officers—were already heading toward the door. I broke away from Enzo to get the attention of the one closest to me, the one who had had his back to me earlier. I tapped him on the shoulder; he turned and seemed very surprised to see me.

"Who are you?" he said.

"Has something happened to the *Magellan*?" I asked. The best way to learn stuff is not to get distracted, for example, by questions relating to one's identity.

The man actually scowled, which is something I'd read about but had never actually seen someone do, until now. "You were listening to our conversation."

"Is the ship lost?" I asked. "Do we know where we are? Is something wrong with the ship?"

He took a step back, like the questions were actually hitting him. I should have taken a step forward and pressed him.

I didn't. He regained his footing and looked past me to Enzo and Gretchen and Magdy, who were all looking at us. Then he realized who we were, and straightened up. "You kids aren't supposed to be here. Get out, or I'll have ship's security throw you out. Get back to your families." He turned to go.

I reached toward him again. "Sir, wait," I said. He ignored me and walked out of the lounge.

"What's going on?" Magdy asked me, from across the room. "I don't want to get in trouble because you've pissed off some random crew member."

I shot Magdy a look, and turned to look out the window again. Roanoke still hung there, blue and green. But suddenly not as beautiful. Suddenly unfamiliar. Suddenly threatening.

Enzo put his hand on my shoulder. "What is it, Zoë?" he said.

I kept staring out the window. "I think we're lost," I said.

"Why?" Gretchen asked. She had come up beside me. "What were they talking about?"

"I couldn't hear it all," I said. "But it sounded like they were saying we're not where we're supposed to be." I pointed to the planet. "That this isn't Roanoke."

"That's crazy," Magdy said.

"Of course it's crazy," I said. "Doesn't mean it might not be true." I pulled out my PDA from my pocket and tried to connect with Dad. No answer. I tried connecting to Mom.

No answer.

"Gretchen," I said. "Would you try calling your dad?" Gretchen's dad was on the colonial council my parents headed up.

"He's not answering," she said, after a minute.

"It doesn't mean anything bad," Enzo said. "We did just skip to a new planet. Maybe they're busy with that."

"Maybe they're still *celebrating,*" Magdy said.

Gretchen smacked him upside the head. "You really *are* childish, Magdy," she said. Magdy rubbed the side of his head and shut up. This

evening was not going anything like he had planned. Gretchen turned to me. "What do you think we should do?"

"I don't know," I said. "They were talking about keeping the crew from talking. It means some of them might know what's going on. It won't take long to get to the colonists."

"It's already gotten to the colonists," Enzo said. "*We're* colonists."

"We might want to tell someone," Gretchen said. "I think your parents and my dad need to know, at least."

I glanced down at her PDA. "I think they might know already," I said.

"We should make sure," she said. So we left the observation lounge and went looking for our parents.

We didn't find them; they were in a council meeting. I did find Hickory and Dickory, or rather, they found me.

"I think I should go," Enzo said, after they'd stared at him, unblinking, for a minute. It wasn't meant as intimidation; they don't blink at all. I gave him a peck on the cheek. He and Magdy left.

"I'm going to listen around," Gretchen said. "See what people are saying."

"All right," I said. "Me too." I held up my PDA. "Let me know what you hear." She left.

I turned to Hickory and Dickory. "You two," I said. "You were in your room earlier."

"We came looking for you," Hickory said. It was the talker of the two. Dickory could talk, but it was always a surprise when it happened.

"Why?" I said. "I was perfectly safe before. I've been perfectly safe since we left Phoenix Station. The *Magellan* is entirely threat-free. The only thing you've been good for this entire trip is scaring the crap out of Enzo. Why are you looking for me now?"

"Things have changed," Hickory said.

"What do you mean?" I asked, but then my PDA vibrated. It was Gretchen.

"That was fast," I said.

"I just ran into Mika," she said. "You won't *believe* what she said a crew member just told her brother."

The adult colonists may have been either clueless or tightlipped, but the Roanoke teenage rumor mill was in full swing. In the next hour, this is what we "learned":

That during the skip to Roanoke, the *Magellan* had wandered too close to a star and had been thrown out of the galaxy.

That there was a mutiny and the first officer had relieved Captain Zane of command because of incompetence.

That Captain Zane shot his own traitorous first officer right there on the bridge and said he'd shoot anyone who tried to help him.

That the computer systems had failed just before the skip, and we didn't know where we were.

That aliens had attacked the ship and were floating out there, deciding whether to finish us off.

That Roanoke was poisonous to human life and if we landed there we'd die.

That there was a core breach in the engine room, whatever that meant, and that the *Magellan* was this close to blowing up.

That ecoterrorists had hacked into the *Magellan*'s computer systems and sent us off in another direction so that we couldn't ruin another planet.

No, wait, it was wildcat colonists-turned-pirates who hacked in, and they were planning to steal our colony supplies because their own were running low.

No, wait, it was mutinous crew members who were going to steal our supplies and leave us stranded on the planet.

No, wait, it wasn't thieving crew, wildcat pirates or ecoterrorists, it was just some idiot programmer who messed up the code, and now we don't know where we are.

No, wait, nothing's wrong, this is just the standard operating procedure. There's not a thing wrong, now stop bothering the crew and let us *work,* damn it.

I want to be clear about something: We knew most of this was crap and nonsense. But what was underneath all the crap and nonsense was just as important: Confusion and unease had spread through the crew of the *Magellan,* and from them, to us. It moved fast. It told any

number of lies—not to lie but to try to make sense of something. Something that happened. Something that shouldn't have happened.

Through all of this, nothing from Mom or Dad, or Gretchen's dad, or any of the colony council, all the members of which had suddenly found themselves called into a meeting.

The common room, previously deserted after the new world celebrations, began to fill up again. This time people weren't celebrating. They looked confused, and concerned and tense, and some of them were beginning to look angry.

"This isn't going to turn out well," Gretchen said to me when we reunited.

"How are you doing?" I said.

She shrugged. "Something's happening, that's for sure. Everyone's on edge. It's putting *me* on edge."

"Don't go crazy on me," I said. "Then there won't be anyone to hold me back when I lose it."

"Oh, well, for *your* sake then," Gretchen said, and rolled her eyes dramatically. "Well. At least now I'm not having to fight off Magdy."

"I like how you can see the bright side of any situation," I said.

"Thanks," she said. "How are you?"

"Honestly?" I asked. She nodded. "Scared as hell."

"Thank God," she said. "It's not only me." She held up her thumb and finger and marked the tiny space between them. "For the last half hour I've been this close to peeing myself."

I took a step back. Gretchen laughed.

The ship's intercom kicked on. "This is Captain Zane," a man's voice said. "This is a general message for passengers and crew. All crew will assemble in their respective department conference rooms in ten minutes, 2330 ship time. All passengers will assemble in the passenger common area in ten minutes, 2330 ship time. Passengers, this is a mandatory assembly. You will be addressed by your colony leaders." The intercom went dead.

"Come on," I said to Gretchen, and pointed to the platform where, earlier in the evening, she and I counted down the seconds until we were at our new world. "We should get a good place."

"It's going to get crowded in here," she said.

I pointed to Hickory and Dickory. "They'll be with us. You know how everyone gives them all the space they want." Gretchen looked up at the two of them, and I realized that she wasn't terribly fond of them either.

Minutes later the council came streaming in from one of the common area side doors and made their way to the platform. Gretchen and I stood in the front, Hickory and Dickory behind us, and at least five feet on every side. Alien bodyguards create their own buffer zone.

A whisper in my ear. "Hey," Enzo said.

I looked over to him and smiled. "I wondered if you were going to be here," I said.

"It's an all-colonist meeting," he said.

"Not here, in general," I said. "*Here.*"

"Oh," Enzo said. "I took a chance that your bodyguards wouldn't stab me."

"I'm glad you did," I said. I took his hand.

On the platform, John Perry, the colony leader, my dad, came forward and picked up the microphone that still lay there from earlier in the evening. His eyes met mine as he reached down to pick it up.

Here's the thing to know about my dad. He's smart, he's good at what he does, and almost all the time, his eyes look like he's about to start laughing. He finds most things funny. He *makes* most things funny.

When he looked at me as he picked up the microphone, his eyes were dark, and heavy, and as serious as I had ever seen them. When I saw them I was reminded, no matter how young he looked, how old he really was. For as much as he could make light of things, he was a man who had seen trouble more than once in his life.

And he was seeing it again. Now, with us. *For* all of us.

Everyone else would know it as soon as he opened his mouth to tell them, but right then was when I knew—when I saw the truth of our situation.

We were lost.

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PART I

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ONE

The flying saucer landed on our front yard and a little green man got out of it.

It was the flying saucer that got my attention. Green men aren't actually unheard of where I come from. All the Colonial Defense Forces were green; it's part of the genetic engineering they do on them to help them fight better. Chlorophyll in the skin gives them the extra energy they need for truly first-class alien stomping.

We didn't get many Colonial Defense Force soldiers on Huckleberry, the colony I lived on; it was an established colony and we hadn't been seriously attacked in a couple of decades. But the Colonial Union goes out of its way to let every colonist know all about the CDF, and I knew more about them than most.

But the flying saucer, well. *That's* novel. New Goa is a farming community. Tractors and harvesters and animal-drawn wagons, and wheeled public buses when we wanted to live life on the edge and visit the provincial capital. An actual flying transport was a rare thing indeed. Having one small enough for a single passenger land on our lawn was definitely not an everyday occurrence.

"Would you like Dickory and me to go out and meet him?" asked Hickory. We watched from inside the house as the green man pulled himself out of the transport.

I looked over at Hickory. "Do you think he's an actual threat? I think if he wanted to attack us, he could have just dropped a rock on the house while he was flying over it."

"I am always for prudence," Hickory said. The unsaid portion of that sentence was *when you are involved*. Hickory is very sweet, and paranoid.

"Let's try the first line of defense instead," I said, and walked over to the screen door. Babar the mutt was standing at it, his front paws up on the door, cursing the genetic fate that left him without opposable thumbs or the brains to pull the door instead of pushing on it. I opened the door for him; he took off like a furry heat-seeking slobber missile. To the green man's credit, he took a knee and greeted Babar like an old friend, and was generously coated in dog drool for his pains.

"Good thing he's not soluble," I said to Hickory.

"Babar is not a very good watchdog," Hickory said, as it watched the green man play with my dog.

"No, he's really not," I agreed. "But if you ever need something really *moistened,* he's got you covered."

"I will remember that for future reference," Hickory said, in that noncommittal way designed for dealing with my sarcasm.

"Do that," I said, and opened the door again. "And stay in here for now, please."

"As you say, Zoë," Hickory said.

"Thanks," I said, and walked out to the porch.

By this time the green man had gotten to the porch steps, Babar bouncing behind him. "I like your dog," he said to me.

"I see that," I said. "The dog's only so-so about you."

"How can you tell?" he asked.

"You're not *completely* bathed in saliva," I said.

He laughed. "I'll try harder next time," he said.

"Remember to bring a towel," I said.

The green man motioned to the house. "This is Major Perry's house?"

"I hope so," I said. "All his stuff is here."

This earned me about a two-second pause.

Yes, as it happens, I *am* a sarcastic little thing. Thanks for asking. It comes from living with my dad all these years. He considers himself quite the wit; I don't know how I feel about *that* one, personally, but I will say that it's made me pretty forward when it comes to comebacks

and quips. Give me a soft lob, I'll be happy to spike it. I think it's endearing and charming; so does Dad. We may be in the minority with that opinion. If nothing else it's interesting to see how other people react to it. Some people think it's cute. Others not so much.

I think my green friend fell into the "not so much" camp, because his response was to change the subject. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't think I know who you are."

"I'm Zoë," I said. "Major Perry's daughter. Lieutenant Sagan's, too."

"Oh, right," he said. "I'm sorry. I pictured you as younger."

"I used to be," I said.

"I should have known you were his daughter," he said. "You look like him in the eyes."

Fight the urge, the polite part of my brain said. *Fight it. Just let it go.*

"Thank you," I said. "I'm adopted."

My green friend stood there for a minute, doing that thing people do when they've just stepped in it: freezing and putting a smile on their face while their brain strips its gears trying to figure how it's going to extract itself out of *this* faux pas. If I leaned in, I could probably hear his frontal lobes go *click click click click,* trying to reset.

See, now, that was just mean, said the polite part of my brain.

But come *on*. If the guy was calling Dad "Major Perry," then he probably knew when Dad was discharged from service, which was eight years ago. CDF soldiers can't make babies; that's part of their combat-effective genetic engineering, don't you know—no accidental kids—so his earliest opportunity to spawn would have been when they put him in a new, regular body at the end of his service term. And then there's the whole "nine months gestation" thing. I might have been a little small for my age when I was fifteen, but I assure you, I didn't look *seven*.

Honestly, I think there's a limit to how bad I should feel in a situation like that. Grown men should be able to handle a little basic math.

Still, there's only so long you can leave someone on the hook. "You called Dad 'Major Perry,' " I said. "Did you know him from the service?"

"I did," he said, and seemed happy that the conversation was moving forward again. "It's been a while, though. I wonder if I'll recognize him."

"I imagine he looks the same," I said. "Maybe a different skin tone."

He chuckled at that. "I suppose that's true," he said. "Being green would make it a little more difficult to blend in."

"I don't think he would ever quite blend in here," I said, and then immediately realized all the very many ways that statement could be misinterpreted.

And of course, my visitor wasted no time doing just that. "Does he not blend?" he asked, and then bent down to pat Babar.

"That's not what I meant," I said. "Most of the people here at Huckleberry are from India, back on Earth, or were born here from people who came from India. It's a different culture than the one he grew up in, that's all."

"I understand," the green man said. "And I'm sure he gets along very well with the people here. Major Perry is like that. I'm sure that's why he has the job he has here." My dad's job was as an ombudsman, someone who helps people cut through government bureaucracy. "I guess I'm just curious if he likes it here."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I was just wondering how he's been enjoying his retirement from the universe, is all," he said, and looked back up at me.

In the back of my brain something went *ping*. I was suddenly aware that our nice and casual conversation had somehow become something less casual. Our green visitor wasn't just here for a social call.

"I think he likes it fine," I said, and kept from saying anything else. "Why?"

"Just curious," he said, petting Babar again. I fought off the urge to call my dog over. "Not everyone makes the jump from military life to civilian life perfectly." He looked around. "This looks like a pretty sedate life. It's a pretty big switch."

"I think he likes it just fine," I repeated, putting enough emphasis on the words that unless my green visitor was an absolute toad, he'd know to move on.

"Good," he said. "What about you? How do *you* like it here?"

I opened my mouth to respond, and then shut it just as quickly. Because, well. *There* was a question.

The idea of living on a human colony is more exciting than the reality. Some folks new to the concept think that people out in the colonies go from planet to planet all the time, maybe living on one planet, working on another and then having vacations on a third: the pleasure planet of Vacationaria, maybe. The reality is, sadly, far more boring. Most colonists live their whole lives on their home planet, and never get out to see the rest of the universe.

It's not *impossible* to go from planet to planet, but there's usually a reason for it: You're a member of the crew on a trade ship, hauling fruit and wicker baskets between the stars, or you get a job with the Colonial Union itself and start a glorious career as an interstellar bureaucrat. If you're an athlete, there's the Colonial Olympiad every four years. And occasionally a famous musician or actor will do a grand tour of the colonies.

But mostly, you're born on a planet, you live on a planet, you die on a planet, and your ghost hangs around and annoys your descendants on that planet. I don't suppose there's really anything bad about that—I mean, most people don't actually go more than a couple dozen kilometers from their homes most of the time in day-to-day life, do they? And people hardly see most of their own planet when they do decide to wander off. If you've never seen the sights on your *own* planet, I don't know how much you can really complain about not seeing a whole *other* planet.

But it helps to be on an *interesting* planet.

In case this ever gets back to Huckleberry: I love Huckleberry, really I do. And I love New Goa, the little town where we lived. When you're a kid, a rural, agriculturally-based colony town is a lot of fun to grow up in. It's life on a farm, with goats and chickens and fields of wheat and sorghum, harvest celebrations and winter festivals. There's not an eight- or nine-year-old kid who's been invented who doesn't find all of that unspeakably fun. But then you become a teenager and you start thinking about everything you might possibly want to *do* with your life, and you look at the options available to you. And then all farms, goats and chickens—and all the same people you've known

all your life and will know all your life—begin to look a little less than optimal for a total life experience. It's all still the same, of course. That's the point. It's *you* who's changed.

I know this bit of teenage angst wouldn't make me any different than any other small-town teenager who has ever existed throughout the history of the known universe. But when even the "big city" of a colony—the district capital of Missouri City—holds all the mystery and romance of watching compost, it's not unreasonable to hope for something else.

I'm not saying that there's anything *wrong* with Missouri City (there's nothing wrong with compost, either; you actually need it). Maybe it's better to say it's the sort of place you come back *to,* once you've gone out and had your time in the big city, or the big bad universe. One of the things I know about Mom is that she loved it on Huckleberry. But before she was here, she was a Special Forces soldier. She doesn't talk too much about all the things she's seen and done, but from personal experience I know a little bit about it. I can't imagine a whole life of it. I think she'd say that she'd seen enough of the universe.

I've seen some of the universe, too, before we came to Huckleberry. But unlike Jane—unlike Mom—I don't think I'm ready to say Huckleberry's all I want out of a life.

But I wasn't sure I wanted to say any of *that* to this green guy, who I had become suddenly rather suspicious of. Green men falling from the sky, asking after the psychological states of various family members including oneself, are enough to make a girl paranoid about what's going on. Especially when, as I suddenly realized, I didn't actually get the guy's *name*. He'd gotten this far into my family life without actually saying who he was.

Maybe this was just something he'd innocently managed to overlook—this wasn't a formal interview, after all—but enough bells were ringing in my head that I decided that my green friend had had enough free information for one day.

Green man was looking at me intently, waiting for me to respond. I gave him my best noncommittal shrug. I was fifteen years old. It's a quality age for shrugging.

He backed off a bit. "I don't suppose your dad is home," he said.

"Not yet," I said. I checked my PDA and showed it to him. "His workday finished up a few minutes ago. He and Mom are probably walking home."

"Okay. And your mom is constable here, right?"

"Right," I said. Jane Sagan, frontier law woman. Minus the frontier. It fit her. "Did you know Mom, too?" I asked. Special Forces was an entirely different thing from regular infantry.

"Just by reputation," he said, and again there was that studied casual thing.

Folks, a little tip: Nothing is more transparent than you try for casual and miss. My green friend was missing it by a klick, and I got tired of feeling lightly groped for information.

"I think I'll go for a walk," I said. "Mom and Dad are probably right down the road. I'll let them know you're here."

"I'll go with you," Green man offered.

"That's all right," I said, and motioned him onto the porch, and to our porch swing. "You've been traveling. Have a seat and relax."

"All right," he said. "If you're comfortable having me here while you're gone." I think that was meant as a joke.

I smiled at him. "I think it'll be fine," I said. "You'll have company."

"You're leaving me the dog," he said. He sat.

"Even better," I said. "I'm leaving you two of my friends." This is when I called into the house for Hickory and Dickory, and then stood away from the door and watched my visitor, so I wouldn't miss his expression when the two of them came out.

He didn't *quite* wet his pants.

Which was an accomplishment, all things considered. Obin—which is what Hickory and Dickory are—don't look *exactly* like a cross between a spider and a giraffe, but they're close enough to make some part of the human brain fire up the *drop ballast* alert. You get used to them after a bit. But the point is it takes a while.

"This is Hickory," I said, pointing to the one at the left of me, and then pointed to the one at my right. "And this is Dickory. They're Obin."

"Yes, I know," my visitor said, with the sort of tone you'd expect from a very small animal trying to pretend that being cornered by a pair

of very large predators was not that big of a deal. “Uh. So. *These* are your friends.”

“*Best* friends,” I said, with what I felt was just the right amount of brainless gush. “And they *love* to entertain visitors. They’ll be happy to keep you company while I go look for my parents. Isn’t that right?” I said to Hickory and Dickory.

“Yes,” they said, together. Hickory and Dickory are fairly monotone to begin with; having them be monotone in stereo offers an additional—and delightful!—creepy effect.

“Please say hello to our guest,” I said.

“Hello,” they said, again in stereo.

“Uh,” said Green man. “Hi.”

“Great, everybody’s friends,” I said, and stepped off the porch. Babar left our green friend to follow me. “I’m off, then.”

“You *sure* you don’t want me to come along?” Green man said. “I don’t mind.”

“No, please,” I said. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to get up for anything.” My eyes sort of casually flicked over at Hickory and Dickory, as if to imply it would be a shame if they had to make steaks out of him.

“Great,” he said, and settled onto the swing. I think he got the hint. See, *that’s* how you do studied casual.

“Great,” I said. Babar and I headed off down the road to find my folks.

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TWO

I climbed out onto the roof through my bedroom window and looked back at Hickory. "Hand me those binoculars," I said. It did—

(Obin: "it," not "he" or "she." Because they're hermaphrodites. That means male and female sex organs. Go ahead and have your giggle. I'll wait. Okay, done? Good.)

—and then climbed out the window with me. Since you've probably never seen it I'll have you know it's a pretty impressive sight to watch an Obin unfold itself to get through a window. Very graceful, with no real analogue to any human movement you might want to describe. The universe, it has *aliens* in it. And they *are.*

Hickory was on the roof with me; Dickory was outside the house, more or less spotting me in case I should trip or feel suddenly despondent, and then fall or leap off the roof. This is their standard practice when I climb out my window: one with me, one on the ground. And they're *obvious* about it; when I was a little kid Mom or Dad would see Dickory blow out the door and hang around just below the roof, and then yell up the stairs for me to get back into my room. Having paranoid alien pals has a downside.

For the record: I've never fallen off the roof.

Well, *once.* When I was ten. But there were extenuating circumstances. That doesn't count.

Anyway, I didn't have to worry about either John or Jane telling me to get back into the house this time. They stopped doing that when I

became a teenager. Besides, they were the reason I was up on the roof in the first place.

"There they are," I said, and pointed for Hickory's benefit. Mom and Dad and my green friend were standing in the middle of our sorghum field, a few hundred meters out. I raised my binoculars and they went from being hash marks to being actual people. Green man had his back to me, but he was saying something, because both Jane and John were looking at him intently. There was a rustle at Jane's feet, and then Babar popped up his head. Mom reached down to scratch him.

"I wonder what he's talking to them about," I said.

"They're too far away," Hickory said. I turned to it to make a comment along the lines of *no kidding, genius.* Then I saw the consciousness collar around its neck and was reminded that in addition to providing Hickory and Dickory with sentience—with their idea of who they were—their collars also gave them expanded senses, which were mostly devoted to keeping me out of trouble.

I was also reminded that their consciousness collars were why they were here in the first place. My father—my biological father—created them for the Obin. I was also reminded that they were why *I* was here, too. Still here, I mean. Alive.

But I didn't go down that road of thought.

"I thought those things were useful," I said, pointing to the collar.

Hickory lightly touched the collar. "The collars do many things," it said. "Enabling us to hear a conversation hundreds of meters away, and in the middle of a grain field, is not one of them."

"So you're useless," I said.

Hickory nodded its head. "As you say," it said, in its noncommittal way.

"It's no fun mocking you," I said.

"I'm sorry," Hickory said.

And the thing of it was, Hickory really *was* sorry. It's not easy being a funny, sarcastic thing when most of who you *were* depended on a machine you wore around your neck. Generating one's own prosthetic identity takes more concentration than you might expect.

Managing a well-balanced sense of sarcasm above and beyond that is a little much to ask for.

I reached over and gave Hickory a hug. It was a funny thing. Hickory and Dickory were here for me; to know me, to learn from me, to protect me, and if need be to die for me. And here I was, feeling protective of *them,* and feeling a little sad for them, too. My father—my biological father—gave them consciousness, something the Obin had lacked and had been searching for, for the entire history of their species.

But he didn't make consciousness *easy* for them.

Hickory accepted my hug and tentatively touched my head; it can be shy when I'm suddenly demonstrative. I took care not to lay it on too thick with the Obin. If I get too emotional it can mess up their consciousness. They're sensitive to when I get overwrought. So I backed up and then looked toward my parents again with the binoculars. Now John was saying something, with one of his patented half-cocked smiles. His smile erased when our visitor started talking again.

"I wonder who he is," I said.

"He is General Samuel Rybicki," Hickory said.

This got another glance back from me. "How do you know that?" I said.

"It is our business to know about who visits you and your family," Hickory said, and touched its collar again. "We queried him the moment he landed. Information about him is in our database. He is a liaison between your Civil Defense Forces and your Department of Colonization. He coordinates the protection of your new colonies."

"Huckleberry isn't a new colony," I said. It wasn't; it had been colonized for fifty or sixty years by the time we arrived. More than enough time to flatten out all the scary bumps new colonies face, and for the human population to become too big for invaders to scrape off the planet. Hopefully. "What do you think he wants from my parents?" I asked.

"We don't know," Hickory said.

"He didn't say anything to you while he was waiting for John and Jane to show up?" I said.

"No," Hickory said. "He kept to himself."

"Well, sure," I said. "Probably because you scared the crap out of him."

"He left no feces," Hickory said.

I snorted. "I sometimes question your alleged lack of humor," I said. "I meant he was too intimidated by you to say anything."

"We assumed that was why you had us stay with him," Hickory said.

"Well, yeah," I said. "But if I knew he was a general, maybe I wouldn't have given him such a hard time." I pointed to my parents. "I don't want them getting any grief because I thought it would be fun to mess with this guy's head."

"I think someone of his rank would not come all this way to be deterred by you," Hickory said.

A list of snappy retorts popped in my head, begging to be used. I ignored them all. "You think he's here on some serious mission?" I asked.

"He is a general," Hickory said. "And he is here."

I looked back through the binoculars again. General Rybicki—as I now knew him—had turned just a bit, and I could see his face a little more clearly. He was talking to Jane, but then turned a bit to say something to Dad. I lingered on Mom for a minute. Her face was locked up tight; whatever was going on, she wasn't very happy about it.

Mom turned her head a bit and suddenly she was looking directly at me, like she knew I was watching her.

"How does she *do* that?" I said. When Jane was Special Forces, she had a body that was even more genetically modified than the ones regular soldiers got. But like Dad, when she left the service, she got put into a normal human body. She's not superhuman anymore. She's just scary observant. Which is close to the same thing. I didn't get away with much of *anything* growing up.

Her attention turned back to General Rybicki, who was addressing her again. I looked up at Hickory. "What I want to know is why they're talking in the sorghum field," I said.

"General Rybicki asked your parents if there was someplace they could speak in private," Hickory said. "He indicated in particular that he wanted to speak away from Dickory and me."

"Were you recording when you were with him?" I asked. Hickory and Dickory had recording devices in their collars that recorded sounds, images and emotional data. Those recordings were sent back to other Obin, so they could experience what it's like to have quality time with me. Odd? Yes. Intrusive? Sometimes, but not usually. Unless I start *thinking* about it, and then I focus on the fact that, why yes, an entire alien race got to experience my puberty through the eyes of Hickory and Dickory. There's nothing like sharing menarche with a billion hermaphrodites. I think it was *everyone's* first time.

"We were not recording with him," Hickory said.

"Okay, good," I said.

"I'm recording now," Hickory said.

"Oh. Well, I'm not sure you should be," I said, waving out toward my parents. "I don't want *them* getting in trouble."

"This is allowed under our treaty with your government," Hickory said. "We're allowed to record all you allow us to record, and to report everything that we experience. My government knew that General Rybicki had visited the moment Dickory and I sent our data query. If General Rybicki wanted his visit to remain secret, he should have met your parents elsewhere."

I chose not to dwell on the fact that significant portions of my life were subject to treaty negotiation. "I don't think he knew you were here," I said. "He seemed surprised when I sicced you on him."

"His ignorance of us or of the Obin treaty with the Colonial Union is not our problem," Hickory said.

"I guess not," I said, a little out of sorts.

"Would you like me to stop recording?" Hickory asked. I could hear the tremble on the edge of its voice. If I wasn't careful about how I showed my annoyance I could send Hickory into an emotional cascade. Then it'd have what amounted to a temporary nervous breakdown right there on the roof. That'd be no good. He could fall off and snap his snaky little neck.

"It's fine," I said, and I tried to sound more conciliatory than I really felt. "It's too late now anyway." Hickory visibly relaxed; I held in a sigh and gazed down at my shoes.

"They're coming back to the house," Hickory said, and motioned toward my parents. I followed its hand; my parents and General Rybicki were indeed heading back our way. I thought about going back into the house but then I saw Mom look directly at me, again. Yup, she'd seen me earlier. The chances were pretty good she knew we had been up there all that time.

Dad didn't look up the entire walk back. He was already lost in thought. When that happened it was like the world collapsing in around him; he didn't see anything else until he was done dealing with what he was dealing with. I suspected I wouldn't see much of him tonight.

As they cleared the sorghum field, General Rybicki stopped and shook Dad's hand; Mom kept herself out of handshaking distance. Then he headed back toward his floater. Babar, who had followed the three of them into the field, broke off toward the general to get in one last petting. He got it after the general got to the floater, then padded back to the house. The floater opened its door to let the general in.

The general stopped, looked directly at me, and waved. Before I could think what I was doing, I waved right back.

"*That* was smart," I said to myself. The floater, General Rybicki inside, winged off, taking him back where he came from.

What do you want with us, General? I thought, and surprised myself by thinking "us." But it only made sense. Whatever he wanted with my parents, I was part of it too.

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THREE

"How do you like it here?" Jane asked me, as we were washing the dishes after dinner. "On Huckleberry, I mean."

"This is not the first time I've been asked that today," I said, taking the plate she handed me and drying it.

This got a slightly raised eyebrow from Mom. "General Rybicki asked you the question," she said.

"Yup," I said.

"And what did you tell him?" Jane asked.

"I told him I liked it just fine," I said. I put the dried plate into the cupboard and waited for the next one.

Jane was holding on to it. "But do you?" she asked.

I sighed, only slightly dramatically. "Okay, I give up," I said. "What's going on? Both you and Dad were like zombies at dinner tonight. I know you missed it, because you were wrapped up in your own heads, but I spent most of dinner trying to get either of you to talk more than a grunt. Babar was a better conversationalist than either of you."

"I'm sorry, Zoë," Jane said.

"You're forgiven," I said. "But I still want to know what's going *on.*" I motioned to Jane's hand, to remind her I was still waiting on that plate.

She handed it over. "General Rybicki has asked your father and me to be the leaders of a new colony."

It was my turn to hold on to the plate. "A new colony."

"Yes," Jane said.

"As in, 'on another planet' new colony," I said.

"Yes," said Jane.

"Wow," I said.

"Yes," Jane said. She knew how to get mileage out of a single word.

"Why did he ask you?" I asked, and resumed drying. "No offense, Mom. But you're a constable in a tiny little village. And Dad's an ombudsman. It's kind of a leap."

"None taken," Jane said. "We had the same question. General Rybicki said that the military experience we had would cross over. John was a major and I was a lieutenant. And whatever other experience we need Rybicki believes we can pick up quickly, before we set foot on the new colony. As for why us, it's because this isn't a normal colony. The colonists aren't from Earth, they're from ten of the oldest planets in the Colonial Union. A colony of colonists. The first of its kind."

"And none of the planets contributing colonists want another planet to have a leadership role," I ventured.

Jane smiled. "That's right," she said. "We're the compromise candidates. The least objectionable solution."

"Got it," I said. "It's nice to be sort of wanted." We continued washing dishes in silence for a few minutes.

"You didn't answer my question," Jane said, eventually. "Do you like it here? Do you want to stay on Huckleberry?"

"I get a vote?" I asked.

"Of course you do," Jane said. "If we take this, it would mean leaving Huckleberry for at least a few standard years while we got the colony up and running. But realistically it would mean leaving here for good. It would mean *all* of us leaving here for good."

"*If,*" I said, a little surprised. "You didn't say yes."

"It's not the sort of decision you make in the middle of a sorghum field," Jane said, and looked at me directly. "It's not something we can just say yes to. It's a complicated decision. We've been looking over the information all afternoon, seeing what the Colonial Union's plans are for the colony. And then we have to think about our lives here. Mine, John's and yours."

I grinned. "I have a life here?" I asked. This was meant as a joke.

Jane squashed it. "Be serious, Zoë," she said. The grin left my face. "We've been here for half of your life now. You have friends. You know this place. You have a future here, if you want it. You *can* have a life here. It's not something to be lightly tossed aside." She plunged her hands into the sink, searching under the soap suds for another dish.

I looked at Jane; there was something in her voice. This wasn't just about me. "*You* have a life here," I said.

"I do," Jane said. "I like it here. I like our neighbors and our friends. I like being the constable. Our life here suits me." She handed me the casserole dish she'd just cleaned. "Before we came here I spent all my life in the Special Forces. On ships. This is the first world I've actually lived *on.* It's important to me."

"Then why is this a question?" I said. "If you don't want to go, then we shouldn't do it."

"I didn't say I *wouldn't* go," Jane said. "I said I have a life here. It's not the same thing. There are good reasons to do it. And it's not just my decision to make."

I dried and put away the casserole dish. "What does Dad want?" I asked.

"He hasn't told me yet," Mom said.

"You know what *that* means," I said. "Dad's not subtle when there's something he doesn't want to do. If he's taking his time to think about it, he probably wants to do it."

"I know," Mom said. She was rinsing off the flatware. "He's trying to find a way to tell me what he wants. It might help him if he knew what *we* wanted first."

"Okay," I said.

"This is why I asked you if you liked it here," Jane said, again.

I thought about it as I dried the kitchen counter. "I like it here," I said, finally. "But I don't know if I want to have a *life* here."

"Why not?" Jane asked.

"There's not much *here* here, is there?" I said. I waved toward the general direction of New Goa. "The selection of life choices here is limited. There's farmer, farmer, store owner, and farmer. Maybe a government position like you and Dad."

"If we go to this new colony your choices are going to be the same," Jane said. "First wave colonist life isn't very romantic, Zoë. The focus is on survival, and preparing the new colony for the second wave of colonists. That means farmers and laborers. Outside of a few specialized roles that will already be filled, there's not much call for anything else."

"Yes, but at least it would be somewhere *new,*" I said. "There we'd be building a new world. Here we're just maintaining an old one. Be honest, Mom. It's kind of slow around these parts. A big day for you is when someone gets into a fistfight. The highlight of Dad's day is settling a dispute over a goat."

"There are worse things," Jane said.

"I'm not asking for open warfare," I said. Another joke.

And once again, another stomping from Mom. "It'll be a brand-new colony world," she said. "They're the ones most at risk for attack, because they have the fewest people and the least amount of defense from the CDF. You know that as well as anyone."

I blinked, actually surprised. I *did* know it as well as anyone. When I was very young—before I was adopted by Jane and John—the planet I lived on (or above, since I was on a space station) was attacked. Omagh. Jane almost never brought it up, because she knew what it did to me to think about it. "You think that's what's going to happen here?" I asked.

Jane must have sensed what was going on in my head. "No, I don't," she said. "This is an unusual colony. It's a test colony in some ways. There will be political pressure for this colony to succeed. That means more and better defenses, among other things. I think we'll be better defended than most colonies starting out."

"That's good to know," I said.

"But an attack could still happen," Jane said. "John and I fought together at Coral. It was one of the first planets humans settled, and it was *still* attacked. No colony is totally safe. There are other dangers, too. Colonies can get wiped out by local viruses or predators. Bad weather can kill crops. The colonists themselves could be unprepared. Colonizing—*real* colonizing, not what we're doing here on Huckleberry—is hard, constant work. Some of the colonists could fail

at it and take the rest of the colony with them. There could be bad leaders making bad decisions."

"I don't think we'd have to worry about that last one," I said. I was trying to lighten the mood.

Jane didn't take the bait. "I'm telling you this isn't without risk," she said. "It's there. A lot of it. And if we do this, we go in with our eyes open to that risk."

This was Mom all over. Her sense of humor wasn't as deprived as Hickory's and Dickory's—I *can* actually make her laugh. But it doesn't stop her from being one of the most serious people I've ever met in my life. When she wants to get your attention about something she thinks is important, she's going to get it.

It's a good quality to have, but right at the moment it was making me seriously uncomfortable. That was her plan, no doubt.

"Mom, I know," I said. "I know it has risks. I know that a lot of things could go wrong. I know it wouldn't be easy." I waited.

"But," Jane said, giving me the prompt she knew I was waiting for.

"But if you and Dad were leading it, I think it'd be worth the risk," I said. "Because I trust you. You wouldn't take the job if you didn't think you could handle it. And I know you wouldn't put me at risk unnecessarily. If you two decided to do it, I would want to go. I would definitely want to go."

I was suddenly aware that while I was speaking, my hand had drifted to my chest, and was lightly touching the small pendant there: a jade elephant, given to me by Jane. I moved my hand from it, a little embarrassed.

"And no matter what, starting a new colony wouldn't be *boring*," I said, to finish up, a little lamely.

Mom smiled, unplugged the sink and dried her hands. Then she took a step over to me and kissed the top of my head; I was short enough, and she was tall enough, that it was a natural thing for her. "I'll let your dad stew on it for a few more hours," she said. "And then I'll let him know where we stand."

"Thanks, Mom," I said.

"And sorry about dinner," she said. "Your dad gets wrapped up in himself sometimes, and I get wrapped up in noticing he's wrapped up in

himself."

"I know," I said. "You should just smack him and tell him to snap out of it."

"I'll put that on the list for future reference," Jane said. She gave me another quick peck and then stepped away. "Now go do your homework. We haven't left the planet yet." She walked out of the kitchen.

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FOUR

Let me tell you about that jade elephant.

My mother's name—my biological mother's name—was Cheryl Boutin. She died when I was five; she was hiking with a friend and she fell. My memories of her are what you'd expect them to be: hazy fragments from a five-year-old mind, supported by a precious few pictures and videos. They weren't that much better when I was younger. Five is a bad age to lose a mother, and to hope to remember her for who she was.

One thing I had from her was a stuffed version of Babar the elephant that my mother gave to me on my fourth birthday. I was sick that day, and had to stay in bed all day long. This did not make me happy, and I let everyone know it, because that was the kind of four-year-old I was. My mother surprised me with the Babar doll, and then we cuddled up together and she read Babar's stories to me until I fell asleep, lying across her. It's my strongest memory of her, even now; not so much how she looked, but the low and warm sound of her voice, and the softness of her belly as I lay against her and drifted off, her stroking my head. The sensation of my mother, and the feeling of love and comfort from her.

I miss her. Still do. Even now. Even right now.

After my mother died I couldn't go anywhere without Babar. He was my connection to her, my connection to that love and comfort I didn't have anymore. Being away from Babar meant being away from what I had left of her. I was five years old. This was my way of

handling my loss. It kept me from falling into myself, I think. Five is a bad age to lose your mother, like I said; I think it could be a good age to lose yourself, if you're not careful.

Shortly after my mother's funeral, my father and I left Phoenix, where I was born, and moved to Covell, a space station orbiting above a planet called Omagh, where he did research. Occasionally his job had him leave Covell on business trips. When that happened I stayed with my friend Kay Greene and her parents. One time my father was leaving on a trip; he was running late and forgot to pack Babar for me. When I figured this out (it didn't take long), I started to cry and panic. To placate me, and because he *did* love me, you know, he promised to bring me a Celeste doll when he returned from his trip. He asked me to be brave until then. I said I would, and he kissed me and told me to go play with Kay. I did.

While he was away, we were attacked. It would be a very long time before I would see my father again. He remembered his promise, and brought me a Celeste. It was the first thing he did when I saw him.

I still have her. But I don't have Babar.

In time, I became an orphan. I was adopted by John and Jane, who I call "Dad" and "Mom," but not "Father" and "Mother," because those I keep for Charles and Cheryl Boutin, my first parents. John and Jane understand this well enough. They don't mind that I make the distinction.

Before we moved to Huckleberry—just before—Jane and I went to a mall in Phoenix City, the capital city of Phoenix. We were on our way to get ice cream; when we passed a toy store I ran in to play hide-and-seek with Jane. This went smashingly until I went down an aisle with stuffed animals in it, and came face-to-face with Babar. Not *my* Babar, of course. But one close enough to him that all I could do was stop and stare.

Jane came up behind me, which meant she couldn't see my face. "Look," she said. "It's Babar. Would you like one to go with your Celeste doll?" She reached over and picked one out of the bin.

I screamed and slapped it out of her hand and ran out of the toy store. Jane caught up with me and held me while I sobbed, cradling me against her shoulder, stroking my head like my mother did when she

read the Babar stories to me on my birthday. I cried myself out and then when I was done, I told her about the Babar my mother had given me.

Jane understood why I didn't want another Babar. It wasn't right to have a new one. It wouldn't be right to put something on top of those memories of her. To pretend that another Babar could replace the one she gave me. It wasn't the toy. It was everything *about* the toy.

I asked Jane not to tell John about Babar or what had just happened. I was feeling out of sorts enough having just gone to pieces in front of my new mom. I didn't want to drag my new dad into it too. She promised. And then she gave me a hug and we went to get ice cream, and I just about made myself throw up eating an entire banana split. Which to my eight-year-old mind was a *good* thing. Truly, an eventful day all around.

A week later Jane and I were standing on the observation deck of the CDFS *Amerigo Vespucci,* staring down at the blue and green world named Huckleberry, where we would live the rest of our lives, or so we thought. John had just left us, to take care of some last-minute business before we took our shuttle trip down to Missouri City, from where we would go to New Goa, our new home. Jane and I were holding hands and pointing out surface features to each other, trying to see if we could see Missouri City from geostationary orbit. We couldn't. But we made good guesses.

"I have something for you," Jane said to me, after we decided where Missouri City would be, or *ought* to be, anyway. "Something I wanted to give you before we landed on Huckleberry."

"I hope it's a puppy," I said. I'd been hinting in that direction for a couple of weeks.

Jane laughed. "No puppies!" she said. "At least not until we're actually settled in. Okay?"

"Oh, all right," I said, disappointed.

"No, it's this," Jane said. She reached into her pocket to pull out a silver chain with something that was a pale green at the end.

I took the chain and looked at the pendant. "It's an elephant," I said.

"It is," Jane said. She knelt down so that she and I were face-to-face. "I bought it on Phoenix just before we left. I saw it in a shop and it made me think of you."

"Because of Babar," I said.

"Yes," Jane said. "But for other reasons, too. Most of the people who live on Huckleberry are from a country on Earth called India, and many of them are Hindu, which is a religion. They have a god called Ganesh, who has the head of an elephant. Ganesh is their god of intelligence, and I think you're pretty smart. He's also the god of beginnings, which makes sense, too."

"Because we're starting our lives here," I said.

"Right," Jane said. She took the pendant and necklace from me and put the silver chain around my neck, fastening it in the back. "There's also the saying that 'an elephant never forgets.' Have you heard it?" I nodded. "John and I are proud to be your parents, Zoë. We're happy you're part of our life now, and will help us make our life to come. But I know neither of us would want you ever to forget your mother and father."

She drew back and then touched the pendant, gently. "This is to remind you how much *we* love you," Jane said. "But I hope it will also remind you how much your mother and father loved you, too. You're loved by two sets of parents, Zoë. Don't forget about the first because you're with us now."

"I won't," I said. "I promise."

"The last reason I wanted to give you this was to continue the tradition," Jane said. "Your mother and your father each gave you an elephant. I wanted to give you one, too. I hope you like it."

"I love it," I said, and then launched myself into Jane. She caught me and hugged me. We hugged for a while, and I cried a little bit too. Because I was eight years old, and I could do that.

I eventually unhugged myself from Jane and looked at the pendant again. "What is this made of?" I asked.

"It's jade," Jane said.

"Does it mean anything?" I asked.

"Well," Jane said, "I suppose it means I think jade is pretty."

"Did Dad get me an elephant, too?" I asked. Eight-year-olds can switch into acquisition mode pretty quickly.

"I don't know," Jane said. "I haven't talked to him about it, because you asked me not to. I don't think he knows about the elephants."

"Maybe he'll figure it out," I said.

"Maybe he will," Jane said. She stood and took my hand again, and we looked out at Huckleberry once more.

About a week and a half later, after we were all moved in to Huckleberry, Dad came through the door with something small and squirmy in his hands.

No, it wasn't an elephant. Use your *heads,* people. It was a puppy.

I squealed with glee—which I was allowed to do, eight at the time, remember—and John handed the puppy to me. It immediately tried to lick my face off.

"Aftab Chengelpet just weaned a litter from their mother, so I thought we might give one of the puppies a home," Dad said. "You know, if you want. Although I don't recall you having any *enthusiasm* for such a creature. We could always give it back."

"Don't you *dare,*" I said, between puppy licks.

"All right," Dad said. "Just remember he's your responsibility. You'll have to feed him and exercise him and take care of him."

"I will," I said.

"And neuter him and pay for his college," Dad said.

"What?" I said.

"John," Mom said, from her chair, where she had been reading.

"Never mind those last two," Dad said. "But you *will* have to give him a name."

I held the puppy at arm's length to get a good look at him; he continued to try to lick my face from a distance and wobbled in my grip as his tail's momentum moved him around. "What are some good dog names?" I asked.

"Spot. Rex. Fido. Champ," Dad said. "Those are the cliché names, anyway. Usually people try to go for something more memorable. When I was a kid I had a dog my dad called Shiva, Destroyer of Shoes. But I don't think that would be appropriate in a community of former Indians. Maybe something else." He pointed to my elephant pendant.

“I notice you seem to be into elephants these days. You have a Celeste. Why not call him Babar?”

From behind Dad I could see Jane look up from her reading to look at me, remembering what happened at the toy store, waiting to see how I would react.

I burst out laughing.

“So that’s a yes,” Dad said, after a minute.

“I like it,” I said. I hugged my new puppy, and then held him out again.

“Hello, Babar,” I said.

Babar gave a happy little bark and then peed all over my shirt.

And that’s the story of the jade elephant.

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FIVE

There was a tap on my door, a rat-a-tat that I gave Hickory to use when I was nine, when I made it a secret member of my secret club. I made Dickory a secret member of an entirely different secret club. Same with Mom, Dad and Babar. I was all about the secret clubs when I was nine, apparently. I couldn't even tell you what the name of that secret club was now. But Hickory still used the knock whenever my bedroom door was closed.

"Come in," I said. I was standing by my bedroom window.

Hickory came in. "It's dark in here," it said.

"That's what happens when it's late and the lights are out," I said.

"I heard you walking about," Hickory said. "I came to see if you needed anything."

"Like a warm glass of milk?" I said. "I'm fine, Hickory. Thank you."

"Then I'll leave you," Hickory said, backing out.

"No," I said. "Come here a minute. Look."

Hickory walked over to stand next to me at the window. He looked where I pointed, to two figures in the road in front of our house. Mom and Dad. "She has been out there for some time," Hickory said. "Major Perry joined her a few minutes ago."

"I know," I said. "I saw him walk out." I heard her walk out, too, about an hour earlier; the squeaking of the springs on the screen door had gotten me out of bed. I hadn't been sleeping, anyway. Thinking about leaving Huckleberry and colonizing somewhere new was

keeping my brain up, and then made me pace around. The idea of leaving was sinking in. It was making me twitchier than I thought it would.

"You know about the new colony?" I asked Hickory.

"We do," Hickory said. "Lieutenant Sagan informed us earlier this evening. Dickory also filed a request to our government for more information."

"Why do you call them by their rank?" I asked Hickory. My brain was looking for tangents at the moment, it seemed, and this was a good one. "Mom and Dad. Why don't you call them 'Jane' and 'John' like everyone else?"

"It's not appropriate," Hickory said. "It's too familiar."

"You've lived with us for *seven years,*" I said. "You *might* be able to risk a little familiarity."

"If you wish us to call them 'John' and 'Jane,' then we will do so," Hickory said.

"Call them what you want," I said. "I'm just saying that if you *want* to call them by their first names, you could."

"We will remember that," Hickory said. I doubted there would be a change in protocol anytime soon.

"You'll be coming with us, right?" I asked, changing the subject. "To the new colony." I hadn't assumed that Hickory and Dickory would *not* be joining us, which when I thought about it might not have been a smart assumption.

"Our treaty allows it," Hickory said. "It will be up to you to decide."

"Well, of course I want you to come," I said. "We'd just as soon leave Babar behind than not take you two."

"I am happy to be in the same category as your dog," Hickory said.

"I think that came out wrong," I said.

Hickory held up a hand. "No," it said. "I know you did not mean to imply Dickory and I are like pets. You meant to imply Babar is part of your household. You would not leave without him."

"He's not just part of the household," I said. "He's family. Slobbery, sort of dim family. But family. You're family, too. Weird, alien, occasionally obtrusive family. But family."

"Thank you, Zoë," Hickory said.

"You're welcome," I said, and suddenly felt shy. Conversations with Hickory were going weird places today. "That's why I asked about you calling my parents by rank, you know. It's not a usual *family* thing."

"If we are truly part of your family, then it is safe to say it's not a usual family," Hickory said. "So it would be hard to say what would be usual for us."

This got a snort from me. "Well, that's true," I said. I thought for a moment. "What *is* your name, Hickory?" I asked.

"Hickory," it said.

"No, I mean, what was your name *before* you came to live with us," I said. "You had to have been named something before I named you Hickory. And Dickory, too, before I named it that."

"No," it said. "You forget. Before your biological father, Obin did not have consciousness. We did not have a sense of self, or the need to describe ourselves to ourselves or to others."

"That would make it hard to do anything with more than two of you," I said. "Saying 'hey, you' only goes so far."

"We had descriptors, to help us in our work," Hickory said. "They were not the same as *names.* When you named Dickory and me, you gave us our true names. We became the first Obin to have names at all."

"I wish I had known that at the time," I said, after I took this in. "I would have given you names that weren't from a nursery rhyme."

"I like my name," Hickory said. "It's popular among other Obin as well. 'Hickory' and 'Dickory' both."

"There are other Obin Hickorys," I said.

"Oh, yes," Hickory said. "Several million, now."

I had no possible intelligible response to that. I turned my attention back to my parents, who were still standing in the road, entwined.

"They love each other," Hickory said, following my gaze.

I glanced back at it. "Not really where I was expecting the conversation to go, but okay," I said.

"It makes a difference," Hickory said. "In how they speak to each other. How they communicate with each other."

"I suppose it does," I said. Hickory's observation was an understatement, actually. John and Jane didn't just love each other. The two of them were nuts for each other, in exactly the sort of way that's both touching and embarrassing to a teenage daughter. Touching because who doesn't want their parents to love each other, right down to their toes? Embarrassing because, well. *Parents.* Not supposed to act like goofs about each other.

They showed it in different ways. Dad was the most obvious about it, but I think Mom felt it more intensely than he did. Dad was married before; his first wife died back on Earth. Some part of his heart was still with her. No one else had any claim on Jane's heart, though. John had all of it, or all of it that was supposed to belong to your spouse. No matter how you sliced it, though, there's nothing either of them wouldn't do for each other.

"That's why they're out here," I said to Hickory. "In the road right now, I mean. Because they love each other."

"How so?" Hickory asked.

"You said it yourself," I said. "It makes a difference in how they communicate." I pointed again to the two of them. "Dad wants to go and lead this colony," I said. "If he didn't, he would have just said no. It's how he works. He's been moody and out of sorts all day because he wants it and he knows there are complications. Because *Jane* loves it here."

"More than you or Major Perry," Hickory said.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "It's where she's been married. It's where she's had a family. Huckleberry is her homeworld. He'd say no if she doesn't give him permission to say yes. So that's what she's doing, out there."

Hickory peered out again at the silhouettes of my parents. "She could have said so in the house," it said.

I shook my head. "No," I said. "Look how she's looking up. Before Dad came out, she was doing the same thing. Standing there and looking up at the stars. Looking for the star our new planet orbits, maybe. But what she's really doing is saying good-bye to Huckleberry. Dad needs to *see* her do it. Mom knows that. It's part of the reason she's out there. To let him know she's ready to let this planet go. She's ready to let it go because he's ready to let it go."

"You said it was part of the reason she's out there," Hickory said. "What's the other part?"

"The other part?" I asked. Hickory nodded. "Oh. Well. She needs to say good-bye for herself, too. She's not just doing it for Dad." I watched Jane. "A lot of who she is, she became here. And we may never get back here. It's hard to leave your home. Hard for *her.* I think she's trying to find a way to let it go. And that starts by saying good-bye to it."

"And you?" Hickory said. "Do you need to say good-bye?"

I thought about it for a minute. "I don't know," I admitted. "It's funny. I've already lived on four planets. Well, three planets and a space station. I've been here longest, so I guess it's my home more than any of the rest of them. I know I'll miss some of the things about it. I know I'll miss some of my friends. But more than any of that . . . I'm *excited.* I want to do this. Colonize a new world. I *want* to go. I'm excited and nervous and a little scared. You know?"

Hickory didn't say anything to this. Outside the window, Mom had walked away a little from Dad, and he was turning to head back into the house. Then he stopped and turned back to Mom. She held out her hand to him. He came to her, took it. They began to walk down the road together.

"Good-bye, Huckleberry," I said, whispering the words. I turned away from the window and let my parents have their walk.

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SIX

"I don't know how you could *possibly* be bored," Savitri said to me, leaning on an observation deck rail as we looked out from Phoenix Station to the *Magellan*. "This place is *great*."

I looked over at her with mock suspicion. "Who *are* you, and what have you done with Savitri Guntupalli?"

"I don't know what you mean," Savitri said, blandly.

"The Savitri *I* know was sarcastic and bitter," I said. "*You* are all gushy, like a schoolgirl. Therefore: You're not Savitri. You are some horrible spunky camouflaged alien thing, and I hate you."

"Point of order," Savitri said. "You're a schoolgirl, and you hardly ever gush. I've known you for years and I don't believe I have ever seen you involved in a gushing incident. You are almost entirely gush-free."

"Fine, you gush even more than a schoolgirl," I said. "Which just makes it *worse.* I hope you're happy."

"I *am,*" Savitri said. "Thank you for noticing."

"Hrrrumph," I said, rolled my eyes for extra effect, and applied myself to the observation deck rail with renewed moodiness.

I was not actually irritated with Savitri. She had an excellent reason to be excited; all her life she'd been on Huckleberry and now, finally, she was somewhere *else*: on Phoenix Station, *the* space station, the largest single thing humans had ever built, hovering above Phoenix, the home planet of the entire Colonial Union. For as long as I had known her—which was for as long as she had been my dad's assistant, back in New Goa, on Huckleberry—Savitri had cultivated an air of general

smartassery, which is one reason I adored her and looked up to her. One has to have role models, you know.

But after we had lifted from Huckleberry her excitement from finally getting to see more of the universe had gotten to her. She'd been unguardedly excited about everything; she even got up early to watch the *Magellan,* the ship that would take us to Roanoke, dock with Phoenix Station. I was happy for her that she was so excited about everything, and I mocked her mercilessly for it every chance I got. One day, yes, there would be payback—Savitri taught me much of what I know about being a smartass, but not everything *she* knew about it—but until then it was one of the few things keeping me entertained.

Listen: Phoenix Station is huge, it's busy, and unless you have an actual job—or like Savitri are just in from the sticks—there is *nothing going on.* It's not an amusement park, it's just a big dull combination of government offices, docks and military headquarters, all jammed into space. If it weren't for the fact that stepping outside to get some fresh air would kill you—no fresh air, just lung-popping vacuum—it could be any big, faceless, dead-boring civic center anywhere humans come together to do big, faceless, dead-boring civic things. It is not designed for fun, or at least any sort of fun I was interested in having. I suppose I could have filed something. *That* would have been a kick.

Savitri, in addition to being insensibly excited not to be on Huckleberry, was also being worked like a dog by John and Jane: The three of them had spent nearly all their time since we arrived at Phoenix Station getting up to speed on Roanoke, learning about the colonists who would be with us, and overseeing the loading of supplies and equipment onto the *Magellan.* This didn't come as news to me, but it did leave me with not a whole lot to do, and no one much to do it with. I couldn't even do much with Hickory, Dickory, or Babar; Dad told Hickory and Dickory to lay low while we were on Phoenix Station, and dogs weren't really allowed the run of the station. We had to lay out paper towels for Babar to do his thing on. The first night I did this and tried to get him to take care of business, he gave me a look that said *you have* got *to be kidding.* Sorry, buddy. Now pee, damn it.

The only reason I was getting some time with Savitri at all was that through a clever combination of whining and guilt I had convinced her

to take her lunch break with me. Even then she had brought her PDA and spent half of lunch going over manifests. She was even excited about that. I told her I thought she might be ill.

"I'm sorry you're bored," Savitri said, back in the present. "You might want to hint to your parents."

"Trust me, I did," I said. "Dad actually stepped up, too. He said he's going to take me down to Phoenix. Do some last-minute shopping and other things." The *other things* were the main reason for us to go, but I didn't want to bring them up to Savitri; I was moody enough as it was.

"You haven't come across any other colonists your own age yet?" Savitri asked.

I shrugged. "I've seen some of them."

"But you haven't spoken to any of them," Savitri said.

"Not really," I said.

"Because you're *shy,*" Savitri said.

"Now your sarcasm comes back," I said.

"I'm sympathetic to your boredom," Savitri said. "But less so if you're just marinating in it." She looked around at the observation desk, which had a few other people in it, sitting or reading or staring out at the ships docked at the station. "What about her?" she said, pointing to a girl who looked about my age, who was looking out the deck window.

I glanced over. "What *about* her?" I said.

"She looks about as bored as you," Savitri said.

"Appearances can be deceiving," I said.

"Let's check," Savitri said, and before I could stop her called to the other girl. "Hey," Savitri said.

"Yes?" the girl said.

"My friend here thinks she's the most bored teenage girl on the entire station," Savitri said, pointing at me. I had nowhere to cringe. "I was wondering if you had anything to say about that."

"Well," the girl said, after a minute. "I don't want to brag, but the quality of my boredom is *outstanding.*"

"Oh, I *like* her," Savitri said to me, and then waved the girl over. "This is Zoë," she said, introducing me.

"I can talk," I said to Savitri.

"Gretchen," she said, extending her hand to me.

"Hello," I said, taking it.

"I'm interested in your boredom and would like to hear more," Gretchen said.

Okay, I thought. *I like her too.*

Savitri smiled. "Well, since you two seem to be equally matched, I have to go," she said. "There are containers of soil conditioners that need my attention." She gave me a peck, waved to Gretchen, and left.

"Soil conditioners?" Gretchen said to me, after she had gone.

"It's a long story," I said.

"I've got nothing but time," Gretchen said.

"Savitri is the assistant to my parents, who are heading up a new colony," I said, and pointed to the *Magellan.* "That's the ship we're going on. One of Savitri's jobs is to make sure that everything that's on the manifest list actually gets put on the ship. I guess she's up to soil conditioners."

"Your parents are John Perry and Jane Sagan," Gretchen said.

I stared at her for a minute. "Yeah," I said. "How do you know?"

"Because my dad talks about them a lot," she said, and motioned toward the *Magellan.* "This colony your parents are leading? It was his idea. He was Erie's representative on the CU legislature, and for years he argued that people from established colonies should be able to colonize, not just people from Earth. Finally the Department of Colonization agreed with him—and then it gave the leadership of the colony to your parents instead of him. They told my dad it was a political compromise."

"What did your dad think about that?" I asked.

"Well, I just met you," Gretchen said. "I don't know what sort of language you can handle."

"Oh. Well, *that's* not good," I said.

"I don't think he *hates* your parents," Gretchen said, quickly. "It's not like that. He just assumed that after everything he did, he'd get to lead the colony. 'Disappointment' doesn't even begin to cover it. Although I wouldn't say he likes your parents, either. He got a file on them when they were appointed and then spent the day muttering to himself as he read it."

"I'm sorry he's disappointed," I said. In my head I was wondering if I needed to write Gretchen off as a possible friend; one of those stupid "our houses are at war" scenarios. The first person my age I meet, going to Roanoke, and we were already in different camps.

But then she said, "Yeah, well. At a certain point he got a little stupid about it. He was comparing himself to Moses, like, *Oh, I've led my people to the promised land but I can't enter myself*"—and here she made little hand movements to accentuate the point—"and that's when I decided he was overreacting. Because we're *going*, you know. And he's on your parents' advisory council. So I told him to suck it up."

I blinked. "You actually used those words?" I said.

"Well, no," Gretchen said. "What I actually said was I wondered if I kicked a puppy if it would whine more than he did." She shrugged. "What can I say. Sometimes he needs to get over himself."

"You and I are so totally going to be best friends," I said.

"Are we?" she said, and grinned at me. "I don't know. What are the hours?"

"The hours are terrible," I said. "And the pay is even worse."

"Will I be treated horribly?" she asked.

"You will cry yourself to sleep on a nightly basis," I said.

"Fed crusts?" she asked.

"Of course not," I said. "We feed the crusts to the dogs."

"Oh, very nice," she said. "Okay, you pass. We can be best friends."

"Good," I said. "Another life decision taken care of."

"Yes," she said, and then moved away from the rail. "Now, come on. No point wasting all this attitude on ourselves. Let's go find something to point and laugh at."

Phoenix Station was a lot more interesting after that.

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SEVEN

Here's what I did when my dad took me down to Phoenix: I visited my own grave.

Clearly, this needs an explanation.

I was born and lived the first four years of my life on Phoenix. Near where I lived, there is a cemetery. In that cemetery is a headstone, and on that headstone are three names: Cheryl Boutin, Charles Boutin and Zoë Boutin.

My mother's name is there because she is actually buried there; I remember being there for her funeral and seeing her shroud put into the ground.

My father's name is there because for many years people believed his body was there. It's not. His body lies on a planet named Arist, where he and I lived for a time with the Obin. There *is* a body buried here, though, one that looks like my father and has the same genes as he does. How it got there is a really complicated story.

My name is there because before my father and I lived on Arist, he thought for a time that I had been killed in the attack on Covell, the space station he and I had lived on. There was no body, obviously, because I was still alive; my father just didn't know it. He had my name and dates carved into the headstone before he was told I was still around.

And so there you have it: three names, two bodies, one grave. The only place where my biological family exists, in any form, anywhere in the universe.

In one sense, I'm an orphan, and profoundly so: My mother and father were only children, and their parents were dead before I was born. It's possible I have second cousins twice removed somewhere on Phoenix, but I've never met them and wouldn't know what to say to them even if they existed. Really, what do you say? "Hi, we share about four percent of our genetic makeup, let's be friends"?

The fact is, I'm the last of my line, the last member of the Boutin family, unless and until I decide to start having babies. Now, *there's* a thought. I'm going to table it for now.

In one sense I was an orphan. But in another sense . . .

Well. First, my dad was standing behind me, watching me as I was kneeling down to look at the headstone my name was on. I don't know how it is with other adoptees, but I can say that there never was a time with John and Jane that I didn't feel cherished and loved and *theirs.* Even when I was going through that early puberty phase where I think I said "I hate you" and "Just leave me *alone*" six times daily and ten times on Sunday. *I* would have abandoned me at the bus stop, that's for sure.

John told me that back when he lived on Earth, he had a son, and his son had a boy, Adam, who would have been just about my age, which technically made me an aunt. I thought that was pretty neat. Going from having no family on the one hand to being someone's aunt on the other is a fun trick. I told that to Dad; he said "you contain multitudes," and then walked around with a smile for hours. I finally got him to explain it to me. That Walt Whitman, he knew what he was talking about.

Second, there were Hickory and Dickory to the side of me, twitching and trembling with emotional energy, because they were at the gravesite of my father, even if my father wasn't buried there, and never was. It didn't matter. They were worked up because of what it represented. Through my father, I guess you could say I was adopted by the Obin, too, although my relationship to them wasn't exactly like being someone's daughter, or their aunt. It was a little closer to being their goddess. A goddess for an entire race of people.

Or, I don't know. Maybe something that sounds less egotistical: patron saint, or racial icon or mascot or *something*. It was hard to put

into words; it was hard to even wrap my brain around most days. It's not like I was put on a throne; most goddesses I know about don't have homework and have to pick up dog poop. If this is what being an icon is all about, on a day-to-day basis it's not terribly exciting.

But then I think about the fact that Hickory and Dickory live with me and have spent their lives with me because their government made it a demand of my government when the two of them signed a peace pact. I am actually a treaty condition between two intelligent races of creatures. What do you *do* with that sort of fact?

Well, I tried to use it once: When I was younger I tried to argue with Jane that I should be able to stay up late one night because I had special status under treaty law. I thought that was pretty clever. Her response was to haul out the entire thousand-page treaty—I didn't even know we *had* a physical copy—and invite me to find the part of the treaty that said I always got to have my way. I stomped over to Hickory and Dickory and demanded they tell Mom to let me do what I wanted; Hickory told me they would have to file a request to their government for guidance, and it would take several days, by which time I would already have to be in bed. It was my first exposure to the tyranny of bureaucracy.

What I do know that it means is that I belong to the Obin. Even at that moment in front of the grave, Hickory and Dickory were recording it into their consciousness machines, the machines my father made for them. They would be stored and sent to all the other Obin. Every other Obin would stand here with me, as I knelt at my grave and the grave of my parents, tracing their names and mine with my finger.

I belong. I belong to John and Jane; I belong to Hickory and Dickory and every Obin. And yet for all that, for all the connection I feel—for all the connection I *have*—there are times when I feel alone, and I have the sensation of drifting and not connecting at all. Maybe that's just what you do when you're this age; you have your stretches of alienation. Maybe to find yourself you've got to feel like you're unplugged. Maybe everyone goes through this.

What I knew, though, there at the grave, *my* grave, was that I was having one of those moments.

I had been here before, to this grave. First when my mother was buried, and then, a few years later, when Jane brought me here to say good-bye to both my mother and father. *All the people who know me have gone away*, I said to her. *All of my people are gone*. And then she came over to me and asked me to live with her and John, in a new place. Asked me to let her and John be my new people.

I touched the jade elephant at my neck and smiled, thinking of Jane.

Who am I? Who are my people? Who do I belong to? Questions with easy answers and no answers. I belong to my family and to the Obin and sometimes to no one at all. I am a daughter and goddess and girl who sometimes just doesn't know who she is or what she wants. My brain rattles around my head with this stuff and gives me a headache. I wish I were alone here. I'm glad John's with me. I want to see my new friend Gretchen and make sarcastic comments until we burst out laughing. I want to go to my stateroom on the *Magellan*, turn off the light, hug my dog, and cry. I want to leave this stupid cemetery. I don't ever want to leave it because I know I'm never coming back to it. This is my last time with my people, the ones who are already gone.

Sometimes I don't know if my life is complicated, or if it's that I just think too much about things.

I knelt at the grave, thought some more, and tried to find a way to say a last good-bye to my mother and father and to keep them with me, to stay and to go, to be the daughter and goddess and girl who doesn't know what she wants, all at once, and to belong to everyone and keep myself.

It took a while.

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EIGHT

"You seem sad," Hickory said, as we took the shuttle back to Phoenix Station. Dickory sat next to Hickory, impassive as ever.

"I am sad," I said. "I miss my mother and father." I glanced over to John, who was sitting in the front of the shuttle with the pilot, Lieutenant Cloud. "And I think all this moving and leaving and going is getting to me a little bit. Sorry."

"No need to apologize," Hickory said. "This journey has been stressful for us, too."

"Oh, good," I said, turning back to the two of them. "Misery loves company."

"If you would like we would be happy to try to cheer you up," Hickory said.

"Really," I said. This was a new tactic. "How would you do that?"

"We could tell you a story," Hickory said.

"What story?" I asked.

"One that Dickory and I have been working on," Hickory said.

"You've been *writing?*" I said. I didn't bother to keep the incredulousness out of my voice.

"Is it that surprising?" Hickory said.

"Absolutely," I said. "I didn't know you had it in you."

"The Obin don't have stories of their own," Hickory said. "We learned about them through you, when you had us read to you."

I was puzzled for a minute, and then I remembered: When I was younger I asked Hickory and Dickory to read bedtime stories to me. It

was a failed experiment, to say the least; even with their consciousness machines on, neither of them could tell a story to save their lives. The beats were all wrong—they didn't know how to read the emotions in the story is the best way I can put it. They could read the words, all right. They just couldn't tell the *story*.

"So you've been reading stories since then," I said.

"Sometimes," Hickory said. "Fairy tales and myths. We are most interested in myths, because they are stories of gods and creation. Dickory and I have decided to make a creation myth for the Obin, so we have a story of our own."

"And this is the story you want to tell me," I said.

"If you think it would cheer you up," Hickory said.

"Well, is it a *happy* creation myth?" I asked.

"It is for us," Hickory said. "You should know you play a part in it."

"Well, then," I said. "I definitely want to hear it now."

Hickory conferred with Dickory quickly, in their own language. "We will tell you the short version," Hickory said.

"There's a long version?" I said. "I'm really intrigued."

"The remainder of the shuttle ride will not be long enough for the long version," Hickory said. "Unless we then went back down to Phoenix. And then back up. And then back down again."

"The short version it is," I said.

"Very well," Hickory said, and began. "Once upon a time—"

"Really?" I said. " 'Once upon a time'?"

"What is wrong with 'once upon a time'?" Hickory asked. "Many of your stories and myths start that way. We thought it would be appropriate."

"There's nothing wrong with it," I said. "It's just a little old-fashioned."

"We will change it if you like," Hickory said.

"No," I said. "I'm sorry, Hickory, I interrupted you. Please start again."

"Very well," Hickory said. "Once upon a time . . ."

Once upon a time there were creatures who lived on a moon of a large gas planet. And these creatures did not have a name, nor did they know they lived on a moon, nor did they know that moon circled a gas planet, nor what a planet was, nor did they know anything in a way that could be said that they were knowing it. They were animals, and they had no consciousness, and they were born and lived and died, all their lives without thought or the knowledge of thought.

One day, although the animals knew nothing of the idea of days, visitors came to the moon that circled the gas planet. And these visitors were known as Consu, although the animals on the planet did not know that, because it was what the Consu called themselves, and the animals were not smart and could not ask the Consu what they called themselves, or know that things could have names.

The Consu came to the moon to explore and they did, noting all the things about the moon, from the air in its sky to the shape of its lands and waters to the shape and manner of all the life that lived in the moon's land, air and water. And when they came to these certain creatures who lived on this moon, the Consu became curious about them and how they lived their lives, and studied them and how they were born and lived and died.

After the Consu had watched the creatures for some time the Consu decided that they would change the creatures, and would give them something that the Consu possessed and that the creatures did not, which was intelligence. And the Consu took the genes of the creatures and changed them so that their brains, as they grew, would develop intelligence well beyond what the creatures would themselves achieve through experience or through many years of evolution. The Consu made these changes to a few creatures and then set them back on the moon and over many generations all the creatures became intelligent.

Once the Consu gave intelligence to the creatures they did not stay on the moon, nor shared themselves with the creatures, but departed and left machines above the sky, which the creatures would not see, to watch the creatures. And so the creatures for a very long time did not learn of the Consu and what they had done to the creatures.

And for a very long time these creatures who now had intelligence grew in number and learned many things. They learned how to make

tools and create a language and work together for common goals and to farm the land and mine metals and create science. But although the creatures thrived and learned, they did not know that they among all intelligent creatures were unique, because they did not know there were other intelligent creatures.

One day, after the creatures had gained intelligence, another race of intelligent people came to visit the moon, the first since the Consu, although the creatures did not remember the Consu. And these new people called themselves the Arza and each of the Arza also had a name. And the Arza were amazed that the creatures on the moon, who were intelligent and who had built tools and cities, did not have a name and did not have names for each of their number.

And it was then the creatures discovered through the Arza what made them unique: They were the only people in all the universe who were not conscious. Although every creature could think and reason, it could not know itself as every other intelligent creature could know itself. The creatures lacked awareness of who they were as individuals, even as they lived and thrived and grew on the face of the moon of the planet.

When the creatures learned this, and although no individual could know it felt this, there grew within the race of these creatures a hunger for that thing they did not have: for the consciousness that the creatures knew collectively they did not have as individuals. And this is when the creatures first gave themselves a name, and called themselves "Obin," which in their language meant "The ones who lack," although it might be better translated as "The deprived ones" or "The ones without gifts," and although they named their race they did not give names to each of their individual number.

And the Arza took pity on the creatures who now called themselves Obin, and revealed to them the machines that floated in the sky and that were put there by the Consu, who they knew to be a race of immense intelligence and unknowable aims. The Arza studied the Obin and discovered that their biology was unnatural, and so the Obin learned who had created them.

And the Obin asked the Arza to take them to the Consu, so they could ask why the Consu had done these things, but the Arza refused,

saying the Consu met only with other races to fight them, and they feared what would happen to the Arza if they brought the Obin before the Consu.

So it was the Obin determined they must learn to fight. And while the Obin did not fight the Arza, who had been kind to the Obin and took pity on them and then left the Obin in peace, there came another race of creatures called the Belestier, who planned to colonize the moon on which the Obin lived and kill all the Obin because they would not live in peace with them. The Obin struggled with the Belestier, killing all those who landed on their moon, and in doing so found they had an advantage; because the Obin did not know themselves, they were not afraid of death, and had no fear where others had fear in abundance.

The Obin killed the Belestier, and learned from their weapons and technology. In time the Obin left their own moon to colonize other moons and grow their numbers and make war on other races when those other races chose to make war on the Obin.

And there came a day, after many years, when the Obin decided they were ready to meet the Consu, and found where they lived and set out to meet them. Although the Obin were strong and determined, they did not know the power of the Consu, who brushed them aside, killing any Obin who dared to call or attack, and there were many thousands of these.

Eventually the Consu became curious about the creatures they had made and offered to answer three questions for the Obin, if half the Obin everywhere would offer themselves up as a sacrifice to the Consu. And this was a hard bargain, because although no individual Obin would know its own death, such a sacrifice would wound the race, because by this time it had made many enemies among the intelligent races, and they would most certainly attack the Obin when they were weak. But the Obin had a hunger and needed answers. So one half of the Obin willingly offered themselves to the Consu, killing themselves in all manner of ways, wherever they were.

And the Consu were satisfied and answered our three questions. Yes, they had given the Obin intelligence. Yes, they could have given the Obin consciousness but did not, because they wanted to see what consciousless intelligence was like. No, they would not now give us

consciousness, nor would they ever, nor would they allow us to ask again. And since that day the Consu have not allowed the Obin to speak to them again; each embassy to them since that day has been killed.

The Obin spent many years fighting many races as it returned itself to its former strength, and in time it became known to other races that to fight with the Obin meant death, for the Obin would not relent or show mercy or pity or fear, because the Obin did not know these things themselves. And for a long time this was the way of things.

One day a race known as the Rraey attacked a human colony and its space station, killing all the humans they could. But before the Rraey could complete their task, the Obin attacked them, because the Obin wanted the colony world for themselves. The Rraey were weakened after their first attack and were defeated and killed. The Obin took the colony and its space station, and because the space station was known as a scientific outpost, the Obin looked through its records to see what useful technology they could take.

It was then that the Obin discovered that one of the human scientists, who was named Charles Boutin, was working on a way to hold and store consciousness outside of the human body, in a machine based on technology the humans had stolen from the Consu. The work was not done, and the technology was not something the Obin at the space station could follow, nor the Obin scientists whom they had brought along. The Obin looked for Charles Boutin among the human survivors of the space station attacks, but he was not to be found, and it was discovered that he was away from the station when it was attacked.

But then the Obin learned that Charles Boutin's daughter Zoë had been on the space station. The Obin took her from the station and she alone was spared among the humans. And the Obin kept her and kept her safe and found a way to tell Charles Boutin that she was alive and offered to return her if he would give the Obin consciousness. But Charles Boutin was angry, not at the Obin but at the humans who he thought had let his daughter die, and demanded in exchange for giving the Obin consciousness, that the Obin would make war on the humans, and defeat them. The Obin could not do this themselves but allied with

two other races, the Rraey, whom they had just attacked, and the Enesha, who were allies of the humans, to make war on the humans.

Charles Boutin was satisfied and in time joined the Obin and his daughter, and worked to create consciousness for the Obin. Before he could finish his task, the humans learned of the alliance between the Obin and the Rraey and the Enesha, and attacked. The alliance was broken and the Enesha were made to war on the Rraey by the humans. And Charles Boutin was killed and his daughter Zoë was taken from the Obin by the humans. And although no individual Obin could sense it, the entire nation despaired because in agreeing to give them consciousness Charles Boutin was their friend among all friends, who would do for them what even the great Consu would not: give them awareness of themselves. When he died, their hope for themselves died. To lose his daughter, who was of him and who was dear to them because of him, compounded this despair.

And then the humans sent a message to the Obin that they knew of Boutin's work and offered to continue it, in exchange for an alliance and the agreement by the Obin to war on the Enesha, who had allied with the Obin against the humans, once the Enesha had defeated the Rraey. The Obin agreed to this but added the condition that once the Obin were given consciousness that two of their number would be allowed to know Zoë Boutin, and to share that knowledge with all other Obin, because she was what remained of Charles Boutin, their friend and their hero.

And so it was that the Obin and the humans became allies, the Obin attacked and defeated the Enesha in due time, and the Obin, thousands of generations after their creation, were given consciousness by Charles Boutin. And among their number, the Obin selected two, who would become companions and protectors to Zoë Boutin and share her life with her new family. And when Zoë met them she was not afraid because she had lived with the Obin before, and she gave the two of them names: Hickory and Dickory. And the two of them became the first Obin to have names. And they were glad, and they know they are glad, because of the gift Charles Boutin gave them and all Obin.

And they lived happily ever after.

Hickory said something to me I didn't hear. "What?" I said.

"We are not sure 'and they lived happily ever after' is the appropriate ending," said Hickory, and then stopped and looked closely at me. "You are crying," it said.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was remembering. The parts of it I was in."

"We told them wrong," Hickory said.

"No," I said, and put up my hand to reassure it. "You didn't tell it wrong, Hickory. It's just the way you tell it and the way I remember it are a little . . ." I wiped a tear off my face and searched for the right word. "They're just a little *different*, is all."

"You do not like the myth," Hickory said.

"I like it," I said. "I like it very much. It's just some things hurt me to remember. It happens that way for us sometimes."

"I am sorry, Zoë, for causing you distress," Hickory said, and I could hear the sadness in its voice. "We wanted to cheer you up."

I got up from my seat and went over to Hickory and Dickory and hugged them both. "I know you did," I said. "And I'm really glad you tried."

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NINE

"Oh, look," Gretchen said. "Teenage boys, about to do something stupid."

"Shut *up*," I said. "That couldn't *possibly* happen." But I looked anyway.

Sure enough, across the *Magellan*'s common area, two clots of teenage males were staring each other down with that look of *we're so gonna fight about something lame*. They were all getting ready for a snarl, except for one of them, who gave every appearance of trying to talk some sense into one guy who looked particularly itchin' to fight.

"There's one who appears to have a brain," I said.

"One out of eight," Gretchen said. "Not a really excellent percentage. And if he really had a brain he'd probably be getting out of the way."

"This is true," I said. "Never send a teenage boy to do a teenage girl's job."

Gretchen grinned over to me. "We have that mind-meld thing going, don't we?"

"I think you know the answer to that," I said.

"You want to plan it out or just improvise?" Gretchen asked.

"By the time we plan it out, someone's going to be missing teeth," I said.

"Good point," Gretchen said, and then got up and started moving toward the boys.

Twenty seconds later the boys were startled to find Gretchen in the middle of them. "You're making me lose a bet," she said, to the one who looked the most aggressive.

The dude stared for a moment, trying to wrap whatever was passing for his brain around this sudden and unexpected appearance. "What?" he said.

"I said, you're making me lose a bet," Gretchen repeated, and then jerked a thumb over toward me. "I had a bet with Zoë here that no one would start a fight on the *Magellan* before we actually left dock, because no one would be *stupid* enough to do something that would get their entire family kicked off the ship."

"Kicked off the ship two hours before departure, even," I said.

"Right," Gretchen said. "Because what sort of *moron* would you have to be to do that?"

"A teenage *boy* moron," I suggested.

"Apparently," Gretchen said. "See—what's your name?"

"What?" the guy said again.

"Your *name*," Gretchen said. "What your mother and father will call you, *angrily*, once you've gotten them kicked off the ship."

The guy looked around at his friends. "Magdy," he said, and then opened his mouth as if to say something.

"Well, see, Magdy, I have *faith* in humanity, even the teenage male part of it," Gretchen said, plowing through whatever it was that our Magdy might have had to say. "I believed that not even teenage boys would be dumb enough to give Captain Zane an excuse to kick a bunch of them off the ship while he still could. Once we're under way, the worst he could do is put you in the brig. But right now he could have the crew drop you and your family at the loading bay. Then you could watch the rest of us wave good-bye. Surely, I said, no one could be that *incredibly dense*. But my friend Zoë disagreed. What did you say, Zoë?"

"I said that teenage boys can't think beyond or without their newly dropped testicles," I said, staring at the boy who had been trying to talk sense into his pal. "Also, they smell funny."

The boy grinned. He knew what we were up to. I didn't grin back; I didn't want to mess with Gretchen's play.

"And I was so convinced that I was right and she was wrong that I actually made a bet," Gretchen said. "I bet every single dessert I'd get here on the *Magellan* that no one would be that stupid. That's a serious bet."

"She loves her dessert," I said.

"It's true, I do," Gretchen said.

"She's a dessert *fiend*," I said.

"And now you are going to make me *lose* all my desserts," Gretchen said, poking Magdy in the chest. "This is not acceptable."

There was a snerk from the boy Magdy had been facing off with. Gretchen wheeled on him; the boy actually flinched backward. "I don't know why *you* think this is funny," Gretchen said. "Your family would have been thrown off the ship just like his."

"He started it," the boy said.

Gretchen blinked, dramatically. " 'He started it'? Zoë, tell me I heard that wrong."

"You didn't," I said. "He really said it."

"It doesn't seem possible that anyone over the age of *five* would be using that as a rationale for *anything*," Gretchen said, examining the boy critically.

"Where's your faith in humanity *now*?" I asked.

"I'm losing it," Gretchen said.

"Along with all your desserts," I said.

"Let me guess," Gretchen said, and waved generally at the clot of boys in front of her. "You're all from the same planet." She turned and looked at the other boy clot. "And you're all from another planet." The boys shifted uncomfortably; she had gotten their number. "And so the first thing you do is you start picking fights because of where you *used* to live."

"Because that's the *smart* thing to do with people you're going to spend the rest of your life living with," I said.

"I don't remember that being in the new colonist orientation material," Gretchen said.

"Funny about that," I said.

"Indeed," Gretchen said, and stopped talking.

There was silence for several seconds.

"Well?" Gretchen said.

"What?" Magdy said. It was his favorite word.

"Are you going to fight now or what?" Gretchen said. "If I'm going to lose my bet, now's as good a time as any."

"She's right," I said. "It's almost lunchtime. Dessert is calling."

"So either get on with it or break it up," Gretchen said. She stepped back.

The boys, suddenly aware that whatever it was they were fighting about had been effectively reduced to whether or not some girl would get a cupcake, dispersed, each clot headed pointedly in a separate direction from the other. The sane boy glanced back at me as he walked off with his friends.

"*That* was fun," Gretchen said.

"Yeah, until they all decide to do it again," I said. "We can't use the dessert humiliation trick every time. And there are colonists from ten separate worlds. That's a hundred different possible idiotic teenage boy fight situations."

"Well, the colonists from Kyoto are Colonial Mennonites," Gretchen said. "They're pacifists. So it's only eighty-one possible idiotic teenage boy fight combinations."

"And yet still *only* two of us," I said. "I don't like the odds. And how did you know about the Kyoto folks, anyway?"

"When my father was still thinking he'd be running the colony, he made me read the reports on all the colonists and their original planets," Gretchen said. "He said I was going to be his *aide-de-camp*. Because, you know, that's really what I would have wanted to *do* with my time."

"Comes in handy, though," I said.

Gretchen pulled out her PDA, which was buzzing, and looked at the screen. "Speaking of which," she said, and showed me the screen. "Looks like Dad's calling."

"Go be aide de camp-y," I said.

Gretchen rolled her eyes. "Thanks. Want to get together for the departure? And then we can go have lunch. You'll have lost the bet by then. I'll get your dessert."

"Touch my dessert and you will die in horrible ways," I said. Gretchen laughed and left.

I pulled out my own PDA to see if there were messages from John or Jane; there was one from Jane telling me that Hickory and Dickory were looking for me about something. Well, they knew I was onboard, and they also knew how to reach me by PDA; it's not like I went anywhere without it. I thought about giving them a call but I figured they would find me sooner or later. I put the PDA away and looked up to find the sane boy standing in front of me.

"Hi," he said.

"Uh," I said, a testament to my smoothness.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to sneak up on you like that," he said.

"It's okay," I said, only a little flustered.

He stuck out his hand. "Enzo," he said. "And you're Zoë, I guess."

"I am," I said, taking his hand and shaking it.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," he said, and then seemed to realize he was back where he started. I smiled.

And then there was about, oh, *47 million seconds* of awkward silence. It was only actually a second or two, but as Einstein could tell you, some events have a way of stretching out.

"Thanks for that," Enzo said, finally. "For stopping the fight, I mean."

"You're welcome," I said. "I'm glad you didn't mind we stepped in on what you were doing."

"Well, I wasn't doing a great job of it anyway," Enzo said. "Once Magdy gets himself worked up, it's hard to get him to back down."

"What was that all about anyway?" I asked.

"It's kind of stupid," Enzo said.

"*That* I know," I said, and then wondered if Enzo would take it the wrong way. He smiled. Score one for Enzo. "I mean what caused it."

"Magdy's pretty sarcastic, and he's also pretty loud," Enzo said. "He made some snide remark about what those other guys were wearing as they passed by. One of them got upset and they got into it."

"So you guys nearly had a brawl over fashion," I said.

"I told you it was stupid," Enzo said. "But you know how it is. You get worked up, it's kind of hard to think rationally."

"But *you* were thinking rationally," I said.

"That's my job," Enzo said. "Magdy gets us into trouble, I get us out of it."

"So you've known each other for a while," I said.

"He's been my best friend since we were little," Enzo said. "He's really not a jerk, honest. He just sometimes doesn't think about what he's doing."

"You look out for him," I said.

"It goes both ways," Enzo said. "I'm not much of a fighter. A lot of kids we knew would have taken advantage of that fact if they didn't know Magdy would have punched them in the head."

"Why aren't you much of a fighter?" I asked.

"I think you have to like to fight a little," Enzo said. Then he seemed to realize this was challenging his own masculinity a bit, and this would get him kicked out of the teenage male club. "Don't get me wrong. I can defend myself just fine without Magdy around. We're just a good team."

"You're the brains of the outfit," I suggested.

"That's possible," he allowed, and then seemed to figure out that I'd gotten him to make a whole bunch of statements about himself without getting to find out anything about me. "What about you and your friend? Who is the brains of that outfit?"

"I think Gretchen and I both hold our own pretty well in the brains department," I said.

"That's a little scary," Enzo said.

"It's not a bad thing to be a little intimidating," I said.

"Well, you have that down," Enzo said, with just the right amount of offhandedness. I tried very hard not to blush. "So, listen, Zoë—" Enzo began, and then looked over my shoulder. I saw his eyes get very wide.

"Let me guess," I said, to Enzo. "There are two very scary-looking aliens standing directly behind me."

"How did you know?" Enzo said, after a minute.

"Because what you're doing now is the usual response," I said. I glanced back at Hickory and Dickory. "Give me a minute," I said to them. They took a step back.

"You *know* them?" Enzo said.

"They're sort of my bodyguards," I said.

"You need bodyguards?" Enzo asked.

"It's a little complicated," I said.

"Now I know why you and your friend can both work on being the brains of the outfit," Enzo said.

"Don't worry," I said, and turned to Hickory and Dickory. "Guys, this is my new friend Enzo. Say hello."

"Hello," they said, in their deadly monotone.

"Uh," Enzo said.

"They're perfectly harmless unless they think you're a threat to me," I said.

"What happens then?" Enzo asked.

"I'm not really sure," I said. "But I think it would involve you being turned into a large number of very small cubes."

Enzo looked at me for a minute. "Don't take this the wrong way," he said. "But I'm a little afraid of you right now."

I smiled at this. "Don't be," I said, and I took his hand, which seemed to surprise him. "I want us to be friends."

There was an interesting play across Enzo's face: pleasure at the fact I'd taken his hand, and apprehension that if he showed too much pleasure at the fact, he'd be summarily cubed. It was very cute. He was very cute.

As if on cue, Hickory audibly shifted its weight.

I sighed. "I need to talk to Hickory and Dickory," I said, to Enzo. "Will you excuse me?"

"Sure," Enzo said, and took his hand out of mine.

"Will I see you later?" I asked.

"I hope so," Enzo said, and then got that look that said his brain was telling him he was being too enthusiastic. Shut up, stupid brain. Enthusiasm is a *good* thing. He backed off and went away. I watched him go a little.

Then I turned to Hickory and Dickory. "This had better be good," I said.

"Who was that?" Hickory asked.

"That was Enzo," I said. "Which I already told you. He's a boy. A cute one, too."

"Does he have impure intentions?" Hickory asked.

"What?" I said, slightly incredulous. " 'Impure intentions'? Are you serious? No. I've only known him for about twenty minutes. Even for a teenage boy, that would be a pretty quick ramp-up."

"This is not what we have heard," Hickory said.

"From whom?" I asked.

"From Major Perry," Hickory said. "He said that he was once a teenage boy himself."

"Oh, God," I said. "Thank you so *very* much for the mental image of Dad as a teenage sack of hormones. That's the sort of image that takes therapy to get rid of."

"You have asked us to intercede for you with teenage boys before," Hickory said.

"That was a special case," I said. And it had been. Just before we left Huckleberry my parents had gone off on a planetary survey of Roanoke and I was given tacit permission to have a good-bye party for my friends, and Anil Rameesh had taken it upon himself to sneak into my bedroom and get naked, and upon discovery, to inform me that he was giving me his virginity as a good-bye gift. Well, he didn't put it that way; he was trying to avoid mentioning the whole "virginity" aspect of it at all.

Regardless, this was a gift I really didn't want, even though it was already unwrapped. I told Hickory and Dickory to escort him out; Anil responded by screaming, jumping out my window and down off the roof, and then running all the way home naked. Which was a sight. I had his clothes delivered home the next day.

Poor Anil. He wasn't a bad person. Just deluded and hopeful.

"I will let you know if Enzo presents any problems," I said. "Until then, you leave him alone."

"As you wish," Hickory said. I could tell it was not entirely pleased about this.

"What was it you wanted to talk to me about?" I asked.

"We have news for you from the Obin government," Hickory said. "An invitation."

"An invitation for what?" I asked.

"An invitation to visit our homeworld, and to tour our planets and colonies," Hickory said. "You are now old enough to travel unaccompanied, and while all Obin have known of you since you were young, thanks to our recordings, there is a great desire among all Obin to meet you in person. Our government asks you if you will not accede to this request."

"When?" I asked.

"Immediately," Hickory said.

I looked at them both. "You're asking me this *now*?" I said. "We're less than two hours from departing to Roanoke."

"We have only just now received the invitation," Hickory said. "As soon as it was sent to us, we came to find you."

"It couldn't wait?" I asked.

"Our government wished to ask you before your journey to Roanoke began," Hickory said. "Once you had established yourself on Roanoke, you might be hesitant to leave for such a significant amount of time."

"How much time?" I asked.

"We have sent a proposed itinerary to your PDA," Hickory said.

"I'm asking you," I said.

"The entire tour would take thirteen of your standard months," Hickory said. "Although if you were amenable, it could be extended."

"So, to recap," I said. "You want me to decide in the next *two hours* whether or not to leave my family and friends for at least a year, maybe longer, to tour the Obin worlds by myself."

"Yes," Hickory said. "Although of course Dickory and I would accompany you."

"No other humans, though," I said.

"We could find some if you wanted," Hickory said.

"Would you?" I said. "That would be swell."

"Very well," Hickory said.

"I'm being *sarcastic,* Hickory," I said, irritated. "The answer is no. I mean, *really,* Hickory. You're asking me to make a life-changing decision on two hours' notice. That's completely ridiculous."

"We understand that the timing of this request is not optimal," Hickory said.

"I don't think you do," I said. "I think you know it's short notice, but I don't think you understand that it's *offensive.*"

Hickory shrank back slightly. "We did not mean to offend," it said.

I was about to snap something off but I stopped and started counting in my head, because somewhere in there the rational part of my brain was letting me know I was heading into overreaction territory. Hickory and Dickory's invitation was last-minute, but biting their heads off for it didn't make much sense. Something about the request was just rubbing me the wrong way.

It took me a minute to figure out why. Hickory and Dickory were asking me to leave behind everyone I knew, and everyone I had just met, for a year of being alone. I had already done that, long ago, when the Obin had taken me from Covell, in the time I had to wait before my father could find a way to reclaim me. It was a different time and with different circumstances, but I remember the loneliness and need for human contact. I loved Hickory and Dickory; they were family. But they couldn't offer me what I needed and could get from human contact.

And besides, I just said good-bye to a whole village of people I knew, and before that had said good-bye to family and friends, usually forever, a whole lot more than most people my age. Right now I had just found Gretchen, and Enzo was certainly looking interesting. I didn't want to say good-bye to them even before I properly got to know them.

I looked at Hickory and Dickory, who despite everything they knew about me couldn't have understood why what they were asking me would affect me like this. *It's not their fault,* said the rational part of my brain. And it was right. Which was why it was the rational part of my brain. I didn't always *like* that part, but it was usually on point for stuff like this.

"I'm sorry, Hickory," I said, finally. "I didn't mean to yell at you. Please accept my apology."

"Of course," Hickory said. It unshrunk itself.

"But even if I wanted to go, two hours is not nearly enough time to think this through," I said. "Have you spoken to John or Jane about this?"

"We felt it best to come to you," Hickory said. "Your desire to go would have influenced their decision to let you go."

I smiled. "Not as much as I think you think it would," I said. "You may think I'm old enough to spend a year off touring the Obin worlds, but I guarantee you Dad will have a different opinion about that. It took both Jane and Savitri a couple of days to convince him to let me have that good-bye party while they were away. You think he'd say 'yes' to having me go away for a year when there's a two-hour time limit attached? That's *optimistic.*"

"It is very important to our government," Dickory said. Which was surprising. Dickory almost never spoke about anything, other than to make one of its monochromatic greetings. The fact Dickory felt compelled to pipe up spoke volumes in itself.

"I understand that," I said. "But it's still too sudden. I *can't* make a decision like this now. I just can't. Please tell your government I'm honored by the invitation, and that I want to make a tour of the Obin worlds one day. I really do. But I can't do it like this. And I want to go to Roanoke."

Hickory and Dickory were silent for a moment. "Perhaps if Major Perry and Lieutenant Sagan were to hear our invitation and agree, you might be persuaded," Hickory said.

Rankle, rankle. "What is *that* supposed to mean?" I asked. "First you say you wanted me to say yes because then they might agree, and now you want to work it the other way? You asked me, Hickory. My answer is no. If you think asking my parents is going to get me to change my mind, then you don't understand human teenagers, and you certainly don't understand me. Even *if* they said yes, which, believe me, they won't, since the first thing they will do is ask me what I think of the idea. And I'll tell them what I told you. And *that* I told you."

Another moment of silence. I watched the two of them very closely, looking for the trembles or twitches that sometimes followed when they were emotionally wrung out. The two of them were rock steady. "Very well," Hickory said. "We will inform our government of your decision."

"Tell them that I will consider it some other time. Maybe in a year," I said. Maybe by that time I could convince Gretchen to go with me. And Enzo. As long as we were daydreaming here.

"We will tell them," Hickory said, and then it and Dickory did a little head bow and departed.

I looked around. Some of the people in the common area were watching Hickory and Dickory leave; the others were looking at me with strange expressions. I guess they'd never seen a girl with her own pet aliens before.

I sighed. I pulled out my PDA to contact Gretchen but then stopped before I accessed her address. Because as much as I didn't want to be alone in the larger sense, at that moment, I needed a time out. Something was going on, and I needed to figure what it was. Because whatever it was, it was making me nervous.

I put the PDA back in my pocket, thought about what Hickory and Dickory just said to me, and worried.

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TEN

There were two messages on my PDA after dinner that evening. The first was from Gretchen. "That Magdy character tracked me down and asked me out on a date," it read. "I guess he likes girls who mock the crap out of him. I told him okay. Because he is kind of cute. Don't wait up." This made me smile.

The second was from Enzo, who had somehow managed to get my PDA's address; I suspect Gretchen might have had something to do with that. It was titled "A Poem to the Girl I Just Met, Specifically a Haiku, the Title of Which Is Now Substantially Longer Than the Poem Itself, Oh, the Irony," and it read:

Her name is Zoë
Smile like a summer breeze
Please don't have me cubed.

I laughed out loud at that one. Babar looked up at me and thumped his tail hopefully; I think he was thinking all this happiness would result in more food for him. I gave him a slice of leftover bacon. So I guess he was right about that. Smart dog, Babar.

• • •

After the *Magellan* departed from Phoenix Station, the colony leaders found out about the near-rumble in the common area, because I told them about it over dinner. John and Jane sort of looked at each other significantly and then changed the subject to something else. I guessed

the problem of integrating ten completely different sets of people with ten completely different cultures had already come up in their discussions, and now they were getting the underage version of it as well.

I figured that they would find a way to deal with it, but I really wasn't prepared for their solution.

"Dodgeball," I said to Dad, over breakfast. "You're going to have all us kids play dodgeball."

"Not all of you," Dad said. "Just the ones of you who would otherwise be picking stupid and pointless fights out of boredom." He was nibbling on some coffee cake; Babar was standing by on crumb patrol. Jane and Savitri were out taking care of business; they were the brains of this particular setup. "You don't like dodgeball?" he asked.

"I like it just fine," I said. "I'm just not sure why you think it's an answer to this problem."

Dad set down his coffee cake, brushed off his hands, and started ticking off points with his fingers. "One, we have the equipment and it fits the space. We can't very well play football or cricket on the *Magellan.* Two, it's a team sport, so we can get big groups of kids involved. Three, it's not complicated, so we don't have to spend much time laying out the ground rules to everyone. Four, it's athletic and will give you guys a way to burn off some of your energy. Five, it's just violent enough to appeal to those idiot boys you were talking about yesterday, but not so violent that someone's actually going to get hurt."

"Any more points?" I asked.

"No," Dad said. "I've run out of fingers." He picked up his coffee cake again.

"It's just going to be that the boys are going to make teams with their friends," I said. "So you'll still have the problem of kids from one world staying with their own."

"I would agree with this, if not for the fact that I'm not a complete idiot," Dad said, "and neither is Jane. We have a plan for this."

The plan: Everyone who signed up to play was assigned to a team, rather than allowed to pick their own team. And I don't think the teams were entirely randomly assigned; when Gretchen and I looked over the team lists, Gretchen noted that almost none of the teams had

more than one player from the same world; even Enzo and Magdy were put on different teams. The only kids who were on the same "team" were the Kyotoans; as Colonial Mennonites they avoided playing in competitive sports, so they asked to be the referees instead.

Gretchen and I didn't sign up for any teams; we appointed ourselves league managers and no one called us on it; apparently word of the intense mockery we laid on a wild pack of teenage boys had gotten around and we were feared and awed equally. "That makes me feel pretty," Gretchen said, once such a thing was told to her by one of her friends from Erie. We were watching the first game of the series, with the Leopards playing against the Mighty Red Balls, presumably named after the game equipment. I don't think I approved of the team name, myself.

"Speaking of which, how was your date last night?" I asked.

"It was a little grabby," Gretchen said.

"You want me to have Hickory and Dickory talk to him?" I asked.

"No, it was manageable," Gretchen said. "And besides which, your alien friends creep me out. No offense."

"None taken," I said. "They really are nice."

"They're your bodyguards," Gretchen said. "They're not supposed to be nice. They're supposed to scare the pee out of people. And they do. I'm just glad they don't follow you around all the time. No one would ever come talk to us."

In fact, I hadn't seen either Hickory or Dickory since the day before and our conversation about touring the Obin planets. I wondered if I had managed to hurt their feelings. I was going to have to check in on them to see how they were.

"Hey, your boyfriend just picked off one of the Leopards," Gretchen said. She pointed at Enzo, who was playing in the game.

"He's not my boyfriend, any more than Magdy is yours," I said.

"Is he as grabby as Magdy is?" Gretchen asked.

"What a question," I said. "How dare you ask. I'm madly offended."

"That's a yes, then," Gretchen said.

"No, it's not," I said. "He's been perfectly nice. He even sent me a poem."

"He did *not,*" Gretchen said. I showed it to her on my PDA. She handed it back. "You get the poetry writer. I get the grabber. It's really *not* fair. You want to trade?"

"Not a chance," I said. "But he not's my boyfriend."

Gretchen nodded out to Enzo. "Have you asked him about that?"

I looked over to Enzo, who sure enough was sneaking looks my way while moving around the dodgeball field. He saw I was looking his way, smiled over at me and nodded, and as he was doing that he got nailed righteously hard in the ear by the dodgeball and went down with a *thump*.

I burst out laughing.

"Oh, *nice,*" Gretchen said. "Laughing at your boyfriend's *pain*."

"I know! I'm so bad!" I said, and just about toppled over.

"You don't deserve him," Gretchen said, sourly. "You don't deserve his *poem.* Give them both to me."

"Not a chance," I said, and then looked up and saw Enzo there in front of me. I reflexively put my hand over my mouth.

"Too late," he said. Which of course made me laugh even more.

"She's mocking your pain," Gretchen said, to Enzo. "*Mocking* it, you hear me."

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry," I said, between laughs, and before I thought about what I was doing gave Enzo a hug.

"She's trying to distract you from her *evil,*" Gretchen warned.

"It's working," Enzo said.

"Oh, fine," Gretchen said. "See if I warn you about her evil ways after this." She very dramatically focused back on the game, only occasionally glancing over and grinning at me.

I unhugged from Enzo. "I'm not *actually* evil," I said.

"No, just amused at the pain of others," Enzo said.

"You walked off the court," I said. "It can't have hurt that much."

"There's pain you can't see," Enzo said. "*Existential* pain."

"Oh, boy," I said. "If you're having existential pain from dodgeball, you're really just doing it wrong."

"I don't think you appreciate the philosophical subtleties of the sport," Enzo said. I started giggling again. "Stop it," Enzo said mildly. "I'm being serious here."

"I so hope you're not," I said, and giggled some more. "You want to get lunch?"

"Love to," Enzo said. "Just give me a minute to extract this dodgeball from my Eustachian tube."

It was the first time I had ever heard anyone use the phrase "Eustachian tube" in common conversation. I think I may have fallen a little bit in love with him right there.

"I haven't seen the two of you around much today," I said to Hickory and Dickory, in their quarters.

"We are aware that we make many of your fellow colonists uncomfortable," Hickory said. It and Dickory sat on stools that were designed to accommodate their body shape; otherwise their quarters were bare. The Obin may have gained consciousness and even recently tried their hand at storytelling, but the mysteries of interior decoration still clearly eluded them. "It was decided it would be best for us to stay out of the way."

"Decided by whom?" I asked.

"By Major Perry," Hickory said, and then, before I could open my mouth, "and we agree."

"You two are going to be living with us," I said. "With all of us. People need to get used to you."

"We agree, and they will have time," Hickory said. "But for now we think it's better to give your people time to get used to each other." I opened my mouth to respond, but then Hickory said, "Do you not benefit from our absence at the moment?"

I remembered Gretchen's comment earlier in the day about how the other teens would never come up to us if Hickory and Dickory were always hanging around, and felt a little bit ashamed. "I don't want you to think I don't want you around," I said.

"We do not believe that," Hickory said. "Please do not think that. When we are on Roanoke we will resume our roles. People will be more accepting of us because they will have had time to know you."

"I still don't want you to think you have to stay in here because of me," I said. "It would drive me crazy to be cooped up in here for a

week."

"It is not difficult for us," Hickory said. "We disconnect our consciousnesses until we need them again. Time flies by that way."

"That was very close to a joke," I said.

"If you say so," Hickory said.

I smiled. "Still, if that's the only reason you stay in here—"

"I did not say it was the only reason," Hickory said, interrupting me, which it almost never did. "We are also spending this time preparing."

"For life on Roanoke?" I asked.

"Yes," Hickory said. "And how we will be of best service to you when we are there."

"I think by just doing what you do," I said.

"Possibly," Hickory said. "We think you might be underestimating how much different Roanoke will be from your life before, and what our responsibilities will be to you."

"I know it's going to be different," I said. "I know it's going to be harder in a lot of ways."

"We are glad to hear that," Hickory said. "It will be."

"Enough so that you're spending all this time planning?" I asked.

"Yes," Hickory said. I waited a second to hear if anything else was coming after that, but there wasn't.

"Is there anything you want me to do?" I asked Hickory. "To help you?"

Hickory took a second to respond. I watched it to see what I could sense from it; after this many years, I was pretty good at reading its moods. Nothing seemed unusual or out of place. It was just Hickory.

"No," Hickory said, finally. "We would have you do what you are doing. Meeting new people. Becoming friends with them. Enjoying your time now. When we arrive at Roanoke we do not expect you will have as much time for enjoyment."

"But you're missing out on all my fun," I said. "You're usually there to record it."

"This one time you can get along without us," Hickory said. Another near joke. I smiled again and gave them both a hug just as my PDA vibrated to life. It was Gretchen.

“Your boyfriend really sucks at dodgeball,” she said. “He just took a hit square on his nose. He says to tell you the pain isn’t nearly as enjoyable if you’re not around to laugh at it. So come on down and ease the poor boy’s pain. Or add to it. Either works.”

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ELEVEN

Things to know about the life of Zoë, on the *Magellan*.

First, John and Jane's master plan to keep the teenage boys from killing themselves or others worked like a charm, which meant I grudgingly had to admit to Dad he'd done something smart, which he enjoyed probably more than he should have. Each of the dodgeball teams became their own little group, counterpointing with the already-established groups of kids from former colonies. It might have been a problem if everyone just switched their tribe allegiance to their teams, because then we'd have just substituted one sort of group stupidity for another. But the kids still felt allegiance to their homeworld friends as well, at least one of whom was likely to be on an opposing dodgeball team. It kept everyone friendly, or at least kept some of the more aggressively stupid kids in check until everyone could get over the urge to pick fights.

Or so it was explained to me by Dad, who continued to be pleased with himself. "So you can see how we weave a subtle web of interpersonal connection," he said to me, as we watched one of the dodgeball games.

"Oh, Lord," Savitri, who was sitting with us, said. "The selfsatisfaction here is going to make me gag."

"You're just jealous that you didn't think it up," Dad said to Savitri.

"I *did* think it up," Savitri said. "Part of it, anyway. I and Jane helped with this plan, as I'm sure you recall. You're just taking all the credit."

"These are despicable lies," Dad said.

"Ball," Savitri said, and we all ducked as a runaway ball ricocheted into the crowd.

Whoever thought it up, the dodgeball scheme had side benefits. After the second day of the tournament, the teams started having their own theme songs, as team members riffled through their music collections to find tunes that would get them riled up. And this was where we discovered a real cultural gap: Music that was popular on one world was completely unheard of on another. The kids from Khartoum were listening to chango-soca, the ones from Rus were deep into groundthump and so on. Yes, they all had good beats, and you could dance to them, but if you want to get someone wild-eyed and frothy, all you have to do is suggest that your favorite music was better than theirs. People were whipping out their PDAs and queuing up their songs to make their points.

And thus began the Great *Magellan* Music War: All of us networked our PDAs together and furiously started making playlists of our favorite music to show how *our* music was indisputably the best music ever. In a very short time I was exposed to not just chango-soca and groundthump but also kill-drill, drone, haploid, happy dance (ironically named, as it turned out), smear, nuevopop, tone, *classic* tone, Erie stomp, doowa capella, shaker and some really whacked-out stuff alleged to be waltz but critically missing three-quarter time or indeed any recognizable time signature at all as far as I could tell. I listened to it all with a fair mind, then told all their proponents I pitied them because they had never been exposed to Huckleberry Sound, and sent out a playlist of my own.

"So you make your music by strangling cats," Magdy said, as he listened to "Delhi Morning," one of my favorite songs, with me, Gretchen and Enzo.

"That's *sitar,* you monkey," I said.

" 'Sitar' being the Huckleberry word for 'strangled cats,' " Magdy said.

I turned to Enzo. "Help me out here," I said.

"I'm going to have to go with the cat strangling theory," Enzo said.

I smacked him on the arm. "I thought you were my friend."

"I was," Enzo said. "But now I know how you treat your pets."

"Listen!" Magdy said. The sitar part had just risen out of the mix and was suspended, heartbreakingly, over the bridge of the song. "Annnd right *there* is when the cat died. Admit it, Zoë."

"Gretchen?" I looked over to my last, best friend, who would always defend me against Philistines.

Gretchen looked over to me. "That poor *cat*," she said, and then laughed. Then Magdy grabbed the PDA and pulled up some horrible shaker noise.

For the record, "Delhi Morning" does not sound like strangled cats. It really doesn't. They were all tone-deaf or something. Particularly Magdy.

Tone-deaf or not, however, the four of us were ending up spending a lot of time together. While Enzo and I were doing our slow, amused sizing up of each other, Gretchen and Magdy alternated between being interested in each other and trying to see just how low they could cut each other down verbally. Although you know how these things go. One probably led to the other and vice-versa. And I'm guessing hormones counted for a lot; both of them were good-looking examples of blossoming adolescence, which I think is the best way to put it. They both seemed willing to put up with a lot from each other in exchange for gawking and some light groping, which to be fair to Magdy was not entirely one-sided on his part, if Gretchen's reports were to be believed.

As for Enzo and me, well, this is how we were getting along:

"I made you something," I said, handing him my PDA.

"You made me a PDA," he said. "I always wanted one."

"Goof," I said. Of course he had a PDA; we all did. We would hardly be teens without them. "No, click on the movie file."

He did, and watched for a few moments. Then he cocked his head at me. "So, is the whole thing shots of me getting hit in the head with a dodgeball?" he asked.

"Of course not," I said. "Some of them are of you getting hit in other places." I took the PDA and ran my finger along the fast-forward strip on the video player. "See, look," I said, showing him the groin shot he took earlier in the day.

"Oh, great," he said.

"You're cute when you collapse in aching misery," I said.

"I'm glad you think so," he said, clearly not as enthused as I was.

"Let's watch it again," I said. "This time in slow motion."

"Let's *not*," Enzo said. "It's a painful memory. I had plans for those things one day."

I felt a blush coming on, and fought it back with sarcasm. "Poor Enzo," I said. "Poor squeaky-voiced Enzo."

"Your sympathy is overwhelming," he said. "I think you like watching me get abused. You could offer up some advice instead."

"Move faster," I said. "Try not to get hit so much."

"You're helpful," he said.

"There," I said, pressing the send button on the PDA. "It's in your queue now. So you can treasure it always."

"I hardly know what to say," he said.

"Did you get me anything?" I asked.

"As a matter of fact," Enzo said, and then pulled out his PDA, punched up something, and handed the PDA to me. On it was another poem. I read it.

"This is very sweet," I said. It was actually beautiful, but I didn't want to get mushy on him, not after just sharing video of him taking a hit to his nether regions.

"Yes, well," Enzo said, taking back the PDA. "I wrote it before I saw that video. Just remember that." He pressed his PDA screen. "There. In *your* queue now. So you can treasure it always."

"I will," I said, and would.

"Good," Enzo said. "Because I get a lot of abuse for those, you know."

"For the poems?" I said. Enzo nodded. "From whom?"

"From Magdy, of course," Enzo said. "He caught me writing that one to you and mocked the hell out of me for it."

"Magdy's idea of a poem is a dirty limerick," I said.

"He's not stupid," Enzo said.

"I didn't say he was stupid," I said. "Just vulgar."

"Well, he's my best friend," Enzo said. "What are you gonna do."

"I think it's sweet you stick up for him," I said. "But I have to tell you that if he mocks you out of writing poems for me, I'm going to

have to kick his ass."

Enzo grinned. "You or your bodyguards?" he asked.

"Oh, I'd handle this one personally," I said. "Although I might get Gretchen to help."

"I think she would," Enzo said.

"There's no *think* involved here," I said.

"I guess I better keep writing you poems, then," Enzo said.

"Good," I said, and patted his cheek. "I'm glad we have these little conversations."

And Enzo was as good as his word; a couple of times a day I'd get a new poem. They were mostly sweet and funny, and only a little bit showing off, because he would send them in different poem formats: haiku and sonnets and sestinas and some forms I don't know what they're called but you could see that they were supposed to be something.

And naturally I would show them all to Gretchen, who tried very hard not to be impressed. "The scan's off on that one," she said, after she had read one I showed to her at one of the dodgeball games. Savitri had joined the two of us to watch. She was on her break. "I'd dump him for that."

"It's not off," I said. "And anyway he's not my boyfriend."

"A guy sends poems on the hour and you say he's not your boyfriend?" Gretchen asked.

"If he was her boyfriend, he wouldn't be sending poems anymore," Savitri said.

Gretchen smacked her forehead. "Of course," she said. "It all makes sense now."

"Give me that," I said, taking back my PDA. "Such cynicism."

"You're just saying that because you're getting sestinas," Savitri said.

"Which don't scan," Gretchen said.

"Quiet, both of you," I said, and turned the PDA around so it could record the game. Enzo's team was playing the Dragons in the quarter-final match for the league championship. "All your bitterness is distracting me from watching Enzo get slaughtered out there."

"Speaking of cynicism," Gretchen said.

There was a loud *pock* as the dodgeball smooshed Enzo's face into a not terribly appealing shape. He grabbed his face with both hands, cursed loudly, and dropped to his knees.

"There we go," I said.

"That poor boy," Savitri said.

"He'll live," Gretchen said, and then turned to me. "So you got that."

"It's going into the highlight reel for sure," I said.

"I've mentioned before that you don't deserve him," Gretchen said.

"Hey," I said. "He writes me poems, I document his physical ineptitude. That's how the relationship works."

"I thought you said he wasn't your boyfriend," Savitri said.

"He's not my boyfriend," I said, and saved the humiliating snippet into my "Enzo" file. "It doesn't mean we don't have a relationship." I put my PDA away and greeted Enzo as he came up, still holding his face.

"So you got that," he said to me. I turned and smiled at Gretchen and Savitri, as if to say, *See.* They both rolled their eyes.

In all, there was about a week between when the *Magellan* left Phoenix Station and when the *Magellan* was far enough away from any major gravity well that it could skip to Roanoke. Much of that time was spent watching dodgeball, listening to music, chatting with my new friends, and recording Enzo getting hit with balls. But in between all of that, I actually did spend a little bit of time learning about the world on which we would live the rest of our lives.

Some of it I already knew: Roanoke was a Class Six planet, which meant (and here I'm double-checking with the Colonial Union Department of Colonization Protocol Document, get it wherever PDAs have access to a network) that the planet was within fifteen percent of Earth standard gravity, atmosphere, temperature and rotation, but that the biosphere was not compatible with human biology—which is to say if you ate something there, it'd probably make you vomit your guts out if it didn't kill you outright.

(This made me mildly curious about how many classes of planet there were. Turns out there are eighteen, twelve of which are at least nominally humanly compatible. That said, if someone says you're on a colony ship headed to a Class Twelve planet, the best thing to do is to find an escape pod or volunteer to join the ship's crew, because you're not going to want to land on that world if you can avoid it. Unless you *like* weighing up to two and a half times your normal weight on a planet whose ammonia-choked atmosphere will hopefully smother you before you die of exposure. In which case, you know. Welcome home.)

What do you do on a Class Six planet, when you're a member of a seed colony? Well, Jane had it right when she said it on Huckleberry: You work. You only have so much food supply to go through before you have to add to it from what you've grown—but before you grow your food, you have to make over the soil so it can grow crops that can feed humans (and other species which started on Earth, like almost all our livestock) without choking to death on the incompatible nutrients in the ground. And you have to make sure that earlier-mentioned livestock (or pets, or toddlers, or inattentive adults who didn't pay attention during their training periods) don't graze or eat anything from the planet until you do a toxicology scan so see if it will kill them. The colonist materials we were given suggest this is more difficult than it sounds, because it's not like your livestock will listen to reason, and neither will a toddler or some adults.

So you've conditioned the soil and kept all your animals and dumb humans from gorging on the poisonous scenery: Now it's time to plant, plant, plant your crops like your life depended on it, because it *does.* To bring this point home, the colonist training material is filled with pictures of gaunt colonists who messed up their plantings and ended up a lot thinner (or worse) after their planet's winter. The Colonial Union won't bail you out—if you fail, you fail, sometimes at the cost of your own life.

You've planted and tilled and harvested, and then you do it again, and you keep doing it—and all the while you're also building infrastructure, because one of the major roles of a seed colony is to prepare the planet for the next, larger wave of colonists, who show up a couple of standard years later. I assume they land, look around at

everything you've created, and say, "Well, colonizing doesn't look *that* hard." At which point you get to punch them.

And through this all, and in the back of your mind, is this little fact: Colonies are at their most vulnerable to attack when they're new. There's a reason humans colonize Class Six planets, where the biosystem might kill them, and even Class Twelve planets, where just about everything *else* will kill them too. It's because there are a lot of other intelligent races out there who have the same habitation needs as we have, and we all want as many planets as we can grab. And if someone else is already there, well. That's just something to *work* around.

I knew this very well. And so did John and Jane.

But it was something I wonder if other people—either my age or older—really understood; understood that Class Six planet or not, conditioned soil or not, planted crops or not, everything they've done and worked for doesn't matter much when a spacecraft shows up in your sky, and it's filled with creatures who've decided they want your planet, and you're in the way. Maybe it's not something you *can* understand until it happens.

Or maybe when it comes down to it people just don't think about it because there's nothing to do about it. We're not soldiers, we're colonists. Being a colonist means accepting the risk. And once you've accepted the risk, you might as well not think about it until you have to.

And during our week on the *Magellan,* we certainly didn't have to. We were having *fun*—almost too much fun, to be honest about it. I suspected we were getting an unrepresentative view of colony life. I mentioned this to Dad, while we watched the final game of the dodgeball tournament, in which the Dragons were raining rubbery red doom on the previously undefeated Slime Molds, the team Magdy was on. I was perfectly fine with this; Magdy had gotten insufferable about his team's winning streak. Humility would be a good thing for the boy.

"Of course this is unrepresentative," Dad said. "Do you think you're going to have time to be playing dodgeball when we get to Roanoke?"

"I don't just mean dodgeball," I said.

"I know," he said. "But I don't want you to worry about it. Let me tell you a story."

"Oh, goody," I said. "A story."

"So *sarcastic,*" Dad said. "When I first left Earth and joined the Civil Defense Forces, we had a week like this. We were given our new bodies—those green ones, like General Rybicki still has—and we were given the order to have fun with them for an entire week."

"Sounds like a good way to encourage trouble," I said.

"Maybe it is," Dad said. "But mostly it did two things. The first was to get us comfortable with what our new bodies could do. The second was to give us some time to enjoy ourselves and make friends before we had to go to war. To give us a little calm before the storm."

"So you're giving us this week to have fun before you send us all to the salt mines," I said.

"Not to the salt mines, but certainly to the fields," Dad said, and motioned out to the kids still hustling about on the dodgeball court. "I don't think it's entirely sunk into the heads of a lot of your new friends that when we land, they're going to be put to work. This is a seed colony. All hands needed."

"I guess it's a good thing I got a decent education before I left Huckleberry," I said.

"Oh, you'll still go to school," Dad said. "Trust me on that, Zoë. You'll just work, too. And so will all your friends."

"Monstrously unfair," I said. "Work *and* school."

"Don't expect a lot of sympathy from us," Dad said. "While you're sitting down and reading, we're going to be out there sweating and toiling."

"Who's this 'we'?" I said. "You're the colony leader. You'll be administrating."

"I farmed when I was ombudsman back in New Goa," Dad said.

I snorted. "You mean you paid for the seed grain and let Chaudhry Shujaat work the field for a cut."

"You're missing the point," Dad said. "My point is that once we get to Roanoke we'll all be busy. What's going to get us through it all are our friends. I know it worked that way for me in the CDF. You've made new friends this last week, right?"

"Yes," I said.

"Would you want to start your life on Roanoke without them?" Dad asked.

I thought of Gretchen and Enzo and even Magdy. "Definitely not," I said.

"Then this week did what it was supposed to do," Dad said. "We're on our way from being colonists from different worlds to being a single colony, and from being strangers to being friends. We're all going to need each other now. We're in a better position to work together. And that's the practical benefit to having a week of fun."

"Wow," I said. "I can see how you weaved a subtle web of interpersonal connection here."

"Well, you know," Dad said, with that look in his eye that said that yes, he *did* catch that snarky reference. "That's why I *run* things."

"Is that it?" I asked.

"It's what I tell myself, anyway," he said.

The Dragons made the last out against the Slime Molds and started celebrating. The crowd of colonists watching were cheering as well, and getting themselves into the mood for the really big event of the night: the skip to Roanoke, which would happen in just under a half hour.

Dad stood up. "This is my cue," he said. "I've got to get ready to do the award presentation to the Dragons. A shame. I was pulling for the Slime Molds. I love that name."

"Try to make it through the disappointment," I said.

"I'll try," he said. "You going to stay around for the skip?"

"Are you kidding?" I said. "*Everyone's* going to stay around for the skip. I wouldn't miss it for anything."

"Good," Dad said. "Always a good idea to confront change with your eyes open."

"You think it's really going to be that different?" I asked.

Dad kissed the top of my head and gave me a hug. "Sweetie, I know it's going to be that different. What I don't know is how much more different it's going to be after *that.*"

"I guess we'll find out," I said.

"Yes, and in about twenty-five minutes," Dad said, and then pointed. "Look, there's your mom and Savitri. Let's ring in the new

world together, shall we?”

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PART II

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TWELVE

There was a rattle and then a thump and then a whine as the shuttle's lifters and engines died down. That was it; we had landed on Roanoke. We were home, for the very first time.

"What's that smell?" Gretchen said, and wrinkled her nose.

I took a sniff and did some nose wrinkling of my own. "I think the pilot landed in a pile of rancid socks," I said. I calmed Babar, who was with us and who seemed excited about something; maybe *he* liked the smell.

"That's the planet," said Anna Faulks. She was one of the *Magellan* crew, and had been down to the planet several times, unloading cargo. The colony's base camp was almost ready for the colonists; Gretchen and I, as children of colony leaders, were being allowed to come down on one of the last cargo shuttles rather than having to take a cattle car shuttle with everyone else. Our parents had already been on planet for days, supervising the unloading. "And I've got news for you," Faulks said. "This is about as pretty as the smells get around here. When you get a breeze coming in from the forest, then it gets really bad."

"Why?" I asked. "What does it smell like then?"

"Like everyone you know just threw up on your shoes," Faulks said.

"Wonderful," Gretchen said.

There was a grinding clang as the massive doors of the cargo shuttle opened. There was a slight breeze as the air in the cargo bay puffed out into the Roanoke sky. And then the smell really hit us.

Faulks smiled at us. "Enjoy it, ladies. You're going to be smelling it every day for the rest of your lives."

"So are you," Gretchen said to Faulks.

Faulks stopped smiling at us. "We're going to start moving these cargo containers in a couple of minutes," she said. "You two need to clear out and get out of our way. It would be a shame if your precious selves got squashed underneath them." She turned away from us and started toward the rest of the shuttle cargo crew.

"Nice," I said, to Gretchen. "I don't think now was a smart time to remind her that she's stuck here."

Gretchen shrugged. "She deserved it," she said, and started toward the cargo doors.

I bit the inside of my cheek and decided not to comment. The last several days had made everyone edgy. This is what happens when you know you're lost.

On the day we skipped to Roanoke, this is how Dad broke the news that we were lost.

"Because I know there are rumors already, let me say this first: We are safe," Dad said to the colonists. He stood on the platform where just a couple of hours earlier we had counted down the skip to Roanoke. "The *Magellan* is safe. We are not in any danger at the moment."

Around us the crowd visibly relaxed. I wondered how many of them caught the "at the moment" part. I suspected John put it in there for a reason.

He did. "But we are not where we were told we would be," he said. "The Colonial Union has sent us to a different planet than we had expected to go to. It did this because it learned that a coalition of alien races called the Conclave were planning to keep us from colonizing, by force if necessary. There is no doubt they would have been waiting for us when we skipped. So we were sent somewhere else: to another planet entirely. We are now above the real Roanoke.

"We are not in danger at the moment," John said. "But the Conclave is looking for us. If it finds us it will try to take us from here,

again likely by force. If it cannot remove us, it will destroy the colony. We are safe now, but I won't lie to you. We are being hunted."

"Take us back!" someone shouted. There were murmurings of agreement.

"We can't go back," John said. "Captain Zane has been remotely locked out of the *Magellan*'s control systems by the Colonial Defense Forces. He and his crew will be joining our colony. The *Magellan* will be destroyed once we have landed ourselves and all our supplies on Roanoke. We can't go back. None of us can."

The room erupted in angry shouts and discussions. Dad eventually calmed them down. "None of us knew about this. I didn't. Jane didn't. Your colony representatives didn't. And certainly Captain Zane didn't. This was kept from all of us equally. The Colonial Union and the Colonial Defense Forces have decided for reasons of their own that it is safer to keep us here than to bring us back to Phoenix. Whether we agree with this or not, this is what we have to work with."

"What are we going to do?" Another voice from the crowd.

Dad looked out in the direction the voice came from. "We're going to do what we came here to do in the first place," he said. "We're going to colonize. Understand this: When we all chose to colonize, we knew there were risks. You all know that seed colonies are dangerous places. Even without this Conclave searching for us, our colony would still have been at risk for attack, still a target for other races. None of this has changed. What *has* changed is that the Colonial Union knew ahead of time who was looking for us and why. That allowed them to keep us safe in the short run. It gives an advantage in the long run. Because now we know how to keep ourselves from being found. We know how to keep ourselves safe."

More murmurings from the crowd. Just to the right of me a woman asked, "And just how are we going to keep ourselves safe?"

"Your colonial representatives are going to explain that," John said. "Check your PDAs; each of you has a location on the *Magellan* where you and your former worldmates will meet with your representative. They'll explain to you what we'll need to do, and answer the questions you have from there. But there is one thing I want to be clear about. This is going to require cooperation from everyone. It's going to

require sacrifice from everyone. Our job of colonizing this world was never going to be easy. It's just become a lot harder.

"*But we can do it,*" Dad said, and the forcefulness with which he said it seemed to surprise some people in the crowd. "What's being asked of us is hard, but it's not impossible. We can do it if we work together. We can do it if we know we can rely on each other. Wherever we've come from, we all have to be Roanokers now. This isn't how I would have chosen for this to happen. But this is how we are going to have to make it work. We can do this. We *have* to do this. We have to do it together."

I stepped out of the shuttle, and put my feet on the ground of the new world. The ground's mud oozed over the top of my boot. "Lovely," I said. I started walking. The mud sucked at my feet. I tried not to think of the sucking as a larger metaphor. Babar bounded off the shuttle and commenced sniffing his surroundings. He was happy, at least.

Around me, the *Magellan* crew was on the job. Other shuttles that had landed before were disgorging their cargo; another shuttle was coming in for a landing some distance away. The cargo containers, standard-sized, littered the ground. Normally, once the contents of the containers were taken out, the containers would be sent back up in the shuttles to be reused; waste not, want not. This time, there was no reason to take them back up to the *Magellan.* It wasn't going back; these containers wouldn't ever be refilled. And as it happened, some of these containers wouldn't even be unpacked; our new situation here on Roanoke didn't make it worth the effort.

But it didn't mean that the containers didn't have a purpose; they did. That purpose was in front of me, a couple hundred meters away, where a barrier was forming, a barrier made from the containers. Inside the barrier would be our new temporary home; a tiny village, already named Croatoan, in which all twenty-five hundred of us—and the newly-resentful *Magellan* crew—would be stuck while Dad, Mom and the other colony leaders did a survey of this new planet to see what we needed to do in order to live on it.

As I watched, some of the *Magellan* crew were moving one of the containers into place into the barrier, using top lifters to set the container in place and then turning off their power and letting the container fall a couple of millimeters to the ground with a thump. Even from this distance I felt the vibration in the ground. Whatever was in that container, it was heavy. Probably farming equipment that we weren't allowed to use anymore.

Gretchen had already gotten far ahead of me. I thought about racing to catch up with her but then noticed Jane coming out from behind the newly placed container and talking to one of the *Magellan* crew. I walked toward her instead.

• • •

When Dad talked about sacrifice, in the immediate term he was talking about two things.

First: no contact between Roanoke and the rest of the Colonial Union. Anything we sent back in the direction of the Colonial Union was something that could give us away, even a simple skip drone full of data. Anything sent to us could give us away, too. This meant we were truly isolated: no help, no supplies, not even any mail from friends and loved ones left behind. We were alone.

At first this didn't seem like much of a big deal. After all, we left our old lives behind when we became colonists. We said good-bye to the people who we weren't taking with us, and most of us knew it would be a very long time if ever until we saw those people again. But even for all that, the lines weren't completely severed. A skip drone was supposed to leave the colony on a daily basis, carrying letters and news and information back to the Colonial Union. A skip drone was supposed to arrive on a daily basis, too, with mail, and news and new shows and songs and stories and other ways that we could still feel that we were part of humanity, despite being stuck on a colony, planting corn.

And now, none of that. It was all gone. The no new stories and music and shows were what hit you first—a bad thing if you were hooked on a show or band before you left and were hoping to keep up with it—but then you realized that what it really meant was from now

on you wouldn't know anything about the lives of the people you left behind. You wouldn't see a beloved baby nephew's first steps. You wouldn't know if your grandmother had passed away. You wouldn't see the recordings your best friend took of her wedding, or read the stories that another friend was writing and desperately trying to sell, or see pictures of the places you used to love, with the people you still love standing in the foreground. All of it was gone, maybe forever.

When that realization hit, it hit people hard—and an even harder hit was the realization that everyone else that any of us ever cared about knew nothing about what happened to us. If the Colonial Union wasn't going to tell us where we were going in order to fool this Conclave thing, they certainly weren't going to tell everyone else that they had pulled a fast one with our whereabouts. Everyone we ever knew thought we were lost. Some of them probably thought we had been killed. John and Jane and I didn't have much to worry about on this score—we were each other's family, and all the family we had—but everyone else had someone who was even now mourning them. Savitri's mother and grandmother were still alive; the expression on her face when she realized that they probably thought she was dead made me rush over to give her a hug.

I didn't even want to think about how the *Obin* were handling our disappearance. I just hoped the Colonial Union ambassador to the Obin had on clean underwear when the Obin came to call.

The second sacrifice was harder.

"You're here," Jane said, as I walked up to her. She reached down to pet Babar, who had come bounding up to her.

"Apparently," I said. "Is it always like this?"

"Like what?" Jane said.

"Muddy," I said. "Rainy. Cold. Sucky."

"We're arriving at the beginning of spring here," Jane said. "It's going to be like this for a little while. I think things will get better."

"You think so?" I asked.

"I hope so," Jane said. "But we don't know. The information we have on the planet is slim. The Colonial Union doesn't seem to have

done a normal survey here. And we won't be able to put up a satellite to track weather and climate. So we have to hope it gets better. It would be better if we could know. But hoping is what we have. Where's Gretchen?"

I nodded in the direction I saw her go. "I think she's looking for her dad," I said.

"Everything all right between you two?" Jane said. "You're rarely without each other."

"It's fine," I said. "Everyone's twitchy these last few days, Mom. So are we, I guess."

"How about your other friends?" Jane asked.

I shrugged. "I haven't seen too much of Enzo in the last couple of days," I said. "I think he's taking the idea of being stranded out here pretty badly. Even Magdy hasn't been able to cheer him up. I went to go visit him a couple of times, but he doesn't want to say much, and it's not like I've been that cheerful myself. He's sending me poems, still, though. On paper. He has Magdy deliver them. Magdy hates that, by the way."

Jane smiled. "Enzo's a nice boy," she said.

"I know," I said. "I think I didn't pick a great time to decide to make him my boyfriend, though."

"Well, you said it, everyone's twitchy the last few days," Jane said. "It'll get better."

"I hope so," I said, and I did. I did moody and depressed with the best of them, but even I have my limits, and I was getting near them. "Where's Dad? And where's Hickory and Dickory?" The two of them had gone down in one of the first shuttles with Mom and Dad; between them making themselves scarce on the *Magellan* and being away for the last few days, I was starting to miss them.

"Hickory and Dickory we have out doing a survey of the surrounding area," Jane said. "They're helping us get a lay of the land. It keeps them busy and useful, and keeps them out of the way of most of the colonists at the moment. I don't think any of them are feeling very friendly toward nonhumans at the moment, and we'd just as soon avoid someone trying to pick a fight with them."

I nodded at this. Anyone who tried to pick a fight with Hickory or Dickory was going to end up with something broken, at least. Which would not make the two of them popular, even (or maybe especially) if they were in the right. Mom and Dad were smart to get them out of the way for now.

"Your dad is with Manfred Trujillo," Jane said, mentioning Gretchen's dad. "They're laying out the temporary village. They're laying it out like a Roman Legion encampment."

"We're expecting an attack from the Visigoths," I said.

"We don't know what to expect an attack from," Jane said. The matter-of-fact way she said it did absolutely nothing to cheer me up. "I expect you'll find Gretchen with them. Just head into the encampment and you'll find them."

"It'd be easier if I could just ping Gretchen's PDA and find her that way," I said.

"It would be," Jane agreed. "But we don't get to do that anymore. Try using your eyes instead." She gave me a quick peck on the temple and then walked off to talk to the *Magellan* crew. I sighed and then headed into the encampment to find Dad.

The second sacrifice: Every single thing we had with a computer in it, we could no longer use. Which meant we couldn't use most things we had.

The reason was radio waves. Every piece of electronic equipment communicated with every other piece of electronic equipment through radio waves. Even the tiny radio transmissions they sent could be discovered if someone was looking hard enough, as we were assured that they were. But just turning off the connecting capability was not enough, since we were told that not only did our equipment use radio waves to communicate with each other, they used them internally to have one part of the equipment talk to other parts.

Our electronics couldn't *help* transmitting evidence that we were here, and if someone knew what frequencies they used to work, they could be detected simply by sending the radio signal that turned them on. Or so we were told. I'm not an engineer. All I knew was that a huge

amount of our equipment was no longer usable—and not just unusable, but a *danger* to us.

We had to risk using this equipment to land on Roanoke and set up the colony. We couldn't very well land shuttles without using electronics; it wasn't the trip down that would be a problem, but the landings would be pretty tricky (and messy). But once everything was on the ground, it was over. We went dark, and everything we had in cargo containers that contained electronics would stay in those containers. Possibly forever.

This included data servers, entertainment monitors, modern farm equipment, scientific tools, medical tools, kitchen appliances, vehicles and toys. And PDAs.

This was *not* a popular announcement. Everyone had PDAs, and everyone had their lives in them. PDAs were where you kept your messages, your mail, your favorite shows and music and reading. It's how you connected with your friends, and played games with them. It's how you made recordings and video. It's how you shared the stuff you loved, to the people you liked. It was everyone's outboard brain.

And suddenly they were gone; every single PDA among the colonists—slightly more than one per person—was collected and accounted for. Some folks tried to hide them; at least one colonist tried to sock the *Magellan* crew member who'd been assigned to collect them. That colonist spent the night in the *Magellan* brig, courtesy of Captain Zane; rumor had it the captain cranked down the temperature in the brig and the colonist spent the night shivering himself awake.

I sympathized with the colonist. I'd been without my PDA for three days now and I still kept catching myself reaching for it when I wanted to talk to Gretchen, or listen to some music, or to check to see if Enzo had sent me something, or any one of a hundred different things I used my PDA for on a daily basis. I suspected that part of the reason people were so cranky was because they'd had their outboard brains amputated; you don't realize how much you use your PDA until the stupid thing is gone.

We were all outraged that we didn't have our PDAs anymore, but I had this itchy feeling in the back of my brain that one of the reasons people were so worked up about their PDAs was that it kept them

from having to think about the fact that so much of the equipment we needed to use to survive, we couldn't use at all. You can't just disconnect the computers from our farm equipment; it can't run without it, it's too much a part of the machine. It'd be like taking out your brain and expecting your body to get along without it. I don't think anyone really wanted to face the fact of just how deep the trouble was.

In fact, only one thing was going to keep all of us alive: the two hundred and fifty Colonial Mennonites who were part of our colony. Their religion had kept them using outdated and antique technology; none of their equipment had computers, and only Hiram Yoder, their colony representative, had used a PDA at all (and only then, Dad explained to me, to stay in contact with other members of the Roanoke colonial council). Working without electronics wasn't a state of deprivation for them; it's how they *lived.* It made them the odd folks out on the *Magellan*, especially among us teens. But now it was going to save us.

This didn't reassure everyone. Magdy and a few of his less appealing friends pointed to the Colonial Mennonites as evidence that the Colonial Union had been planning to strand us all along and seemed to resent them for it, as if they had known it all along rather than being just as surprised as the rest of us. Thus we confirmed that Magdy's way of dealing with stress was to get angry and pick nonexistent fights; his near-brawl at the beginning of the trip was no fluke.

Magdy got angry when stressed. Enzo got withdrawn. Gretchen got snappish. I wasn't entirely sure how I got.

"You're mopey," Dad said to me. We were standing outside the tent that was our new temporary home.

"So *that's* how I get," I said. I watched Babar wander around the area, looking for places to mark his territory. What can I say. He's a dog.

"I'm not following you," Dad said. I explained how my friends were acting since we'd gotten lost. "Oh, okay," Dad said. "That makes

sense. Well, if it's any comfort, if I have the time to do anything else but work, I think I would be mopey, too."

"I'm thrilled it runs in the family," I said.

"We can't even blame it on genetics," Dad said. He looked around. All around us were cargo containers, stacks of tents under tarps and surveyor's twine, blocking off where the streets of our new little town will be. Then he looked back to me. "What do you think of it?"

"I think this is what it looks like when God takes a dump," I said.

"Well, yes, *now* it does," Dad said. "But with a lot of work and a little love, we can work our way up to being a festering pit. And what a day that will be."

I laughed. "Don't make me laugh," I said. "I'm trying to work on this mopey thing."

"Sorry," Dad said. He wasn't actually sorry in the slightest. He pointed at the tent next to ours. "At the very least, you'll be close to your friend. This is Trujillo's tent. He and Gretchen will be living here."

"Good," I said. I had caught up with Dad with Gretchen and her dad; the two of them had gone off to look at the little river that ran near the edge of our soon-to-be settlement to find out the best place to put the waste collector and purifier. No indoor plumbing for the first few weeks at least, we were told; we'd be doing our business in buckets. I can't begin to tell you how excited I was to hear that. Gretchen had rolled her eyes a little bit at her dad as he dragged her off to look at likely locations; I think she was regretting taking the early trip. "How long until we start bringing down the other colonists?" I asked.

Dad pointed. "We want to get the perimeter set up first," he said. "We've been here a couple of days and nothing dangerous has popped out of those woods over there, but I think we want to be safer rather than sorrier. We're getting the last containers out of the cargo hold tonight. By tomorrow we should have the perimeter completely walled and the interior blocked out. So two days, I think. In three days everyone will be down. Why? Bored already?"

"Maybe," I said. Babar had come around to me and was grinning up at me, tongue lolling and paws caked with mud. I could tell he was trying to decide whether or not to leap up on two legs and get mud all

over my shirt. I sent him my best *don't even* think *about it* telepathy and hoped for the best. "Not that it's any less boring on the *Magellan* right now. Everyone's in a foul mood. I don't know, I didn't expect colonizing to be like this."

"It's not," Dad said. "We're sort of an exceptional case here."

"Oh, to be like everyone else, then," I said.

"Too late for that," Dad said, and then motioned at the tent. "Jane and I have the tent pretty well set up. It's small and crowded, but it's also cramped. And I know how much you like that." This got another smile from me. "I've got to join Manfred and then talk to Jane, but after that we can all have lunch and try to see if we can't actually enjoy ourselves a little. Why don't you go in and relax until we get back. At least that way you don't have to be mopey *and* windblown."

"All right," I said. I gave Dad a peck on the cheek, and then he headed off toward the creek. I went inside the tent, Babar right behind.

"Nice," I said to Babar, as I looked around. "Furnished in tasteful Modern Refugee style. And I love what they've done with those cots."

Babar looked up at me with that stupid doggy grin of his and then leaped up on one of the cots and laid himself down.

"You idiot," I said. "You could have at least wiped off your paws." Babar, notably unconcerned with criticism, yawned and then closed his eyes.

I got on the cot with him, brushed off the chunkier bits of mud, and then used him as a pillow. He didn't seem to mind. And a good thing, too, since he was taking up half my cot.

"Well, here we are," I said. "Hope you like it here."

Babar made some sort of snuffling noise. *Well said,* I thought.

Even after everything was explained to us, there were still some folks who had a hard time getting it through their heads that we were cut off and on our own. In the group sessions headed by each of the colonial representatives, there was always someone (or someones) who said things couldn't be as bad as Dad was making them out to be, that there had to be some way for us to stay in contact with the rest of humanity or at least use our PDAs.

That's when the colony representatives sent each colonist the last file their PDAs would receive. It was a video file, shot by the Conclave and sent to every other race in our slice of space. In it, the Conclave leader, named General Gau, stood on a rise overlooking a small settlement. When I first saw the video I thought it was a human settlement, but was told that it was a settlement of Whaid colonists, the Whaid being a race I knew nothing about. What I did know was that their homes and buildings looked like ours, or close enough to ours not to matter.

This General Gau stood on the rise just long enough for you to wonder what it was he was looking at down there in the settlement, and the settlement disappeared, turned into ash and fire by what seemed like a thousand beams of light stabbing down from what we were told were hundreds of spaceships floating high above the colony. In just a few seconds there was nothing left of the colony, or the people who lived in it, other than a rising column of smoke.

No one questioned the wisdom of hiding after that.

I don't know how many times I watched the video of the Conclave attack; it must have been a few dozen times before Dad came up to me and made me hand over my PDA—no special privileges just because I was the colony leader's kid. But I wasn't watching because of the attack. Or, well, I should say that wasn't really what I was looking at when I watched it. What I was looking at was the figure, standing on the rise. The creature who ordered the attack. The one who had the blood of an entire colony on his hands. I was looking at this General Gau. I was wondering what he was thinking when he gave the order. Did he feel regret? Satisfaction? Pleasure? Pain?

I tried to imagine what it would take to order the deaths of thousands of innocent people. I felt happy that I couldn't wrap my brain around it. I was terrified that this general could. And that he was out there. Hunting us.

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THIRTEEN

Two weeks after we landed on Roanoke, Magdy, Enzo, Gretchen and I went for a walk.

"Watch where you land," Magdy told us. "There are some big rocks down here."

"Great," Gretchen said. She shined her pocket light—acceptable technology, no computer equipment in it, just an old-fashioned LED—at the ground, looking for a place to land, and then hopped down from the edge of the container wall, aiming for her preferred spot. Enzo and I heard the *oof* as she landed, and then a bit of cursing.

"I told you to watch where you landed," Magdy said, shining his light on her.

"Shut it, Magdy," she said. "We shouldn't even be out here. You're going to get us all in trouble."

"Yeah, well," Magdy said. "Your words would have more moral authority if you weren't actually out here with me." He flicked his light up off of Gretchen and toward me and Enzo, still up on the container wall. "You two planning to join us?"

"Will you please stop with the light?" Enzo said. "The patrol is going to see it."

"The patrol is on the other side of the container wall," Magdy said. "Although if you don't hurry it up, that's not going to be the case for long. So move it." He flicked the light back and forth quickly in Enzo's face, making an annoying strobe effect. Enzo sighed and slid down off the container wall; I heard the muffled thump a second later. Which left

me, feeling suddenly very exposed on the top of the containers that were the defensive perimeter around our little village—and also the frontier beyond which we were not allowed to go at night.

"Come on," Enzo whispered up to me. He, at least, remembered we weren't supposed to be out and modulated his voice accordingly. "Jump down. I'll catch you."

"Are you dumb?" I asked, also in a whispery voice. "You'll end up with my shoes in your eye sockets."

"It was a joke," Enzo said.

"Fine," I said. "Don't catch me."

"Jeez, Zoë," Magdy said, in a definite nonwhisper. "Will you *jump* already?"

I hopped off the container wall, down the three meters or so from the top, and tumbled a little when I landed. Enzo flicked his light on me, and offered me a hand up. I took it and squinted up at him as he pulled me up. Then I flicked my own light over to where Magdy was. "Jerk," I told him.

Magdy shrugged. "Come on," he said, and started along the perimeter of the wall toward our destination.

A few minutes later we were all flashing our lights into a hole.

"Wow," Gretchen said. "We've just broken curfew and risked being accidentally shot by the night guard for this. A hole in the ground. I'm picking our next field trip, Magdy."

Magdy snorted and knelt down into the hole. "If you actually paid attention to anything, you'd know that this *hole* has the council in a panic," Magdy said. "Something dug this out the other night while the patrol wasn't watching. Something was trying to get *in* to the colony from out *here*." He took his light and moved it up the nearest container until he spotted something. "Look. There are scratches on the container. Something tried to go over the top, and then when it couldn't it tried to go under."

"So what you're saying is that we're out here now with a bunch of predators," I said.

"It doesn't have to be a predator," Magdy said. "Maybe it's just something that likes to dig."

I flicked my light back up to the claw marks. "Yeah, that's a *reasonable* theory."

"We couldn't have seen this during the day?" Gretchen asked. "When we could see the things that can leap out and eat us?"

Magdy motioned his light over to me. "Her mom had her security people around it all day long. They weren't letting anybody else near it. Besides, whatever made this hole is long gone now."

"I'll remind you that you said that when something tears out your throat," Gretchen said.

"Relax," Magdy said. "I'm prepared. And anyway, this hole is just the opening act. My dad is friends with some of the security folks. One of them told him that just before they closed everything up for the night, they saw a herd of those fanties over in the woods. I say we go look."

"We should get back," Enzo said. "We shouldn't even be out here, Magdy. If they find us out there, we're all going to catch hell. We can see the fanties tomorrow. When the sun is up, and we can actually see them."

"Tomorrow they'll be awake and foraging," Magdy said. "And there's no way we're going to be able to do anything other than look at them through binoculars." Magdy pointed at me again. "Let me remind you that her parents have kept us cooped up for two weeks now, waiting to find out if anything might bruise us on this planet."

"Or kill us," I said. "Which would be a problem."

Magdy waved this away. "My point is that if we actually want to *see* these things—actually get close enough to them that we can get a good look at them—we have to do it now. They're asleep, no one knows we're gone, and we'll be back before anyone misses us."

"I still think we should go back," Enzo said.

"Enzo, I know this is taking away from valuable make-out time with your girlfriend," Magdy said, "but I thought you *might* want to explore something other than Zoë's tonsils for once."

Magdy was *very* lucky he wasn't in arm's reach when he made that comment. Either my arm or Enzo's.

"You're being an ass again, Magdy," Gretchen said.

"Fine," Magdy said. "You guys go back. I'll see you later. I'm going to see me some fanties." He started toward the woods, waving his pocket light in the grass (or grasslike ground cover) as he walked. I shined my light over to Gretchen. She rolled her eyes in exasperation and started walking after Magdy. After a minute Enzo and I followed.

Take an elephant. Make it just a little smaller. Lose the ears. Make its trunk shorter and tentaclly at the end. Stretch out its legs until it almost but not quite seems impossible that they could support the weight. Give it four eyes. And then do other assorted weird things to its body until it's not that it looks like an elephant, it's just that it looks more like an elephant than it looks like anything else you can think of.

That's a fantie.

In the two weeks we'd been trapped in the colony village, waiting for the "all clear" to actually begin colonization, the fanties had been spotted several times, either in the woods near the village or just barely in the clearing between the village and the woods. A fantie spotting would bring up a mad rush of children to the colony gate (a gap in the container wall, closed up at night) to look and gawk and wave to the creatures. It would also bring a somewhat more studiously casual wave of us teenagers, because we wanted to see them too, we just didn't want to seem *too* interested, since that would mess with our credibility with all our new friends.

Certainly Magdy never gave any indication of actually caring about the fanties at all. He'd allow himself to be dragged to the gate by Gretchen when a herd passed by, but then he spent most of his time talking to the other guys who were also happy to make it look like they had gotten dragged to the gate. Just goes to show, I suppose. Even the self-consciously cool had a streak of kid in them.

There was some argument as to whether the fanties we saw were a local group that lived in the area, or whether we'd seen a number of herds that were just migrating through. I had no idea which theory was right; we'd only been on planet for a couple of weeks. And from a distance, all the fanties looked pretty much the same.

And up close, as we quickly discovered, they smelled horrible.

"Does *everything* on this planet smell like crap?" Gretchen whispered to me as we glanced up at the fanties. They waved back and forth, ever so slightly, as they slept standing on their legs. As if to answer her question, one of the fanties closest to where we were hiding let rip a monumental fart. We gagged and giggled equally.

"Shhhh," Enzo said. He and Magdy were crouched behind another tall bush a couple of meters over from us, just short of the clearing where the fantie herd had decided to rest for the night. There were about a dozen of them, all sleeping and farting under the stars. Enzo didn't seem to be enjoying the visit very much; I think he was worried about us accidentally waking the fanties. This was not a minor concern; fantie legs looked spindly from a distance but up close it was clear they could trample any one of us without too much of a problem, and there were a dozen fanties here. If we woke them up and they panicked, we could end up being pounded into mincemeat.

I think he was also still a little sore about the "exploring tonsils" comment. Magdy, in his usual less-than-charming way, had been digging at Enzo ever since he and I officially started going out. The taunts rose and fell depending on what Magdy's relationship with Gretchen was at the moment. I was guessing at the moment Gretchen had cut him off. Sometimes I thought I needed a graph or maybe a flow chart to understand how the two of them got along.

Another one of the fanties let off an epic load of flatulence.

"If we stay here any longer, I'm going to suffocate," I whispered to Gretchen. She nodded and motioned me to follow her. We snuck over to where Enzo and Magdy were.

"Can we go now?" Gretchen whispered to Magdy. "I know you're probably enjoying the smell, but the rest of us are about to lose dinner. And we've been gone long enough that someone might start wondering where we went."

"In a minute," Magdy said. "I want to get closer to one."

"You're joking," Gretchen said.

"We've come this far," Magdy said.

"You really are an idiot sometimes, you know that?" Gretchen said. "You don't just go walking up to a herd of wild animals and say hello. They'll kill you."

"They're asleep," Magdy said.

"They won't be if you walk right into the middle of them," Gretchen said.

"I'm not *that* stupid," Magdy said, his whispered voice becoming louder the more irritated he became. He pointed to the one closest to us. "I just want to get closer to that one. It's not going to be a problem. Stop worrying."

Before Gretchen could retort Enzo put his hand up to quiet them both. "Look," he said, and pointed halfway down the clearing. "One of them is waking up."

"Oh, wonderful," Gretchen said.

The fantie in question shook its head and then lifted it, spreading the tentacles on its trunk wide. It waved them back and forth.

"What's it doing?" I asked Enzo. He shrugged. He was no more an expert on fanties than I was.

It waved its tentacles some more, in a wider arc, and then it came to me what it was doing. It was *smelling* something. Something that shouldn't be there.

The fantie bellowed, not from its trunk like an elephant, but from its mouth. All the other fanties were instantly awake and bellowing, and beginning to move.

I looked over to Gretchen. *Oh, crap*, I mouthed. She nodded, and looked back over at the fanties. I looked over at Magdy, who had made himself suddenly very small. I don't think he wanted to get any closer now.

The fantie closest to us wheeled about and scraped against the bush we were hiding behind. I heard the thud of its foot as the animal maneuvered itself into a new position. I decided it was time to move but my body overruled me, since it wasn't giving me control of my legs. I was frozen in place, squatting behind a bush, waiting for my trampling.

Which never came. A second later the fantie was gone, run off in the same direction as the rest of its herd: away from us.

Magdy popped up from his crouching position, and listened to the herd rumbling off in the distance. "All right," he said. "What just *happened*?"

"I thought they smelled us for sure," I said. "I thought they'd found us."

"I told you you were an idiot," Gretchen said to Magdy. "If you'd been out there when they woke up, we'd be scooping what was left of you into a bucket."

The two of them started sniping at each other; I turned to look at Enzo, who had turned to face the opposite direction from where the fanties had run. He had his eyes closed but it looked like he was concentrating on something.

"What is it?" I asked.

He opened his eyes, looked at me, and then pointed in the direction he was facing. "The breeze is coming from this direction," he said.

"Okay," I said. I wasn't following him.

"Have you ever gone hunting?" Enzo asked. I shook my head. "We were upwind of the fanties," he said. "The wind was blowing our scent away from them." He pointed to where the first fantie to wake up had been. "I don't think that fantie would have smelled us at all."

Click. "Okay," I said. "Now I get it."

Enzo turned to Magdy and Gretchen. "Guys," he said. "It's time to leave. Now."

Magdy flashed his pocket light at Enzo and seemed ready to say something sarcastic, then caught the expression on Enzo's face in the pocket light's circle. "What is it?"

"The fanties didn't run off because of us," Enzo said. "I think there's something else out there. Something that hunts the fanties. And I think it's coming this way."

It's a cliché of horror entertainments to have teenagers lost in the woods, imagining they're being chased by something horrible that's *right behind them.*

And now I know why. If you ever want to feel like you're on the verge of total, abject bowel-releasing terror, try making your way a klick or two out of a forest, at night, with the certain feeling you're being hunted. It makes you feel alive, it really does, but not in a way you *want* to feel alive.

Magdy was in the lead, of course, although whether he was leading because he knew the way back or just because he was running fast enough that the rest of us had to chase him was up for debate. Gretchen and I followed, and Enzo took up the rear. Once I slowed down to check on him and he waved me off. "Stay with Gretchen," he said. Then I realized that he was intentionally staying behind us so whatever might be following us would have to get through him first. I would have kissed him right then if I hadn't been a quivering mess of adrenaline, desperately running to get home.

"Through here," Magdy said to us. He pointed at an irregular natural path that I recognized as being the one we used to get into the forest in the first place. I was focusing on getting on that path and then something stepped in behind Gretchen and grabbed me. I screamed.

There was a bang, followed by a muffled thump, followed by a shout.

Ezno launched himself at what grabbed at me. A second later he was on the forest floor, Dickory's knife at his throat. It took me longer than it should have to recognize who it was holding the knife.

"Dickory!" I yelled. "Stop!"

Dickory paused.

"Let him go," I said. "He's no danger to me."

Dickory removed the knife and stepped away from Enzo. Enzo scrambled away from Dickory, and away from me.

"Hickory?" I called. "Is everything all right?"

From ahead, I heard Hickory's voice. "Your friend had a handgun. I have disarmed him."

"He's choking me!" Magdy said.

"If Hickory wanted to choke you, you wouldn't be able to talk," I yelled back. "Let him go, Hickory."

"I am keeping his handgun," Hickory said. There was a rustle in the darkness as Magdy picked himself up.

"Fine," I said. Now that we stopped moving, it was like someone pulled a stopper, and all the adrenaline in my body was falling out from the bottom of my feet. I crouched down to keep from falling over.

"No, *not* fine," Magdy said. I saw him emerge out of the gloom, stalking toward me. Dickory interposed itself between me and Magdy.

Magdy's stalking came to a quick halt. "That's my dad's gun. If he finds it missing, I'm dead."

"What were you doing with the gun in the first place?" Gretchen asked. She had also come back to where I was standing, Hickory following behind her.

"I told you I was prepared," Magdy said, and then turned to me. "You need to tell your *bodyguards* that they need to be more careful." He pointed at Hickory. "I almost took off that one's head."

"Hickory?" I said.

"I was not in any serious danger," Hickory said, blandly. His attention seemed elsewhere.

"I want my gun back," Magdy said. I think he was trying for threatening; he failed when his voice cracked.

"Hickory will give you your dad's gun back when we get back to the village," I said. I felt a fatigue headache coming on.

"*Now,*" Magdy said.

"For God's sake, Magdy," I snapped. I was suddenly very tired, and angry. "Will you please just shut up about your damn gun. You're lucky you didn't kill one of us with it. And you're lucky you didn't hit one of *them*"—I waved at Dickory and then Hickory—"because then *you* would be dead, and the rest of us would have to explain how it happened. So just shut up about the stupid gun. Shut *up* and let's go *home*."

Magdy stared at me, then stomped off into the gloom, toward the village. Enzo gave me a strange look and then followed his friend.

"Perfect," I said, and squeezed my temples with my hands. The monster headache I was on the verge of had arrived, and it was a magnificent specimen.

"We should return to the village," Hickory said to me.

"You *think*?" I said, and then stood up and stomped off, away from it and Dickory, back to the village. Gretchen, suddenly left with my two bodyguards for company, was not far behind me.

"I don't want one word of what happened tonight to get back to John and Jane," I said to Hickory, as it, Dickory and I stood in the common

area of the village. At this time of night there were only a couple of other people who were loitering there, and they quickly disappeared when Hickory and Dickory showed up. Two weeks had not been enough time for people to get used to them. We had the common area to ourselves.

"As you say," Hickory said.

"Thank you," I said, and started walking away from them again, toward the tent I shared with my parents.

"You should not have been in the woods," Hickory said.

That stopped me. I turned around to face Hickory. "Excuse me?" I said.

"You should not have been in the woods," Hickory said. "Not without our protection."

"We had protection," I said, and some part of my brain didn't believe those words had actually come out of my mouth.

"Your protection was a handgun wielded by someone who did not know how to use it," Hickory said. "The bullet he fired went into the ground less than thirty centimeters from him. He almost shot himself in the foot. I disarmed him because he was a threat to himself, not to me."

"I'll be sure to tell him that," I said. "But it doesn't matter. I don't need your *permission*, Hickory, to do what I please. You and Dickory aren't my parents. And your *treaty* doesn't say you can tell me what to do."

"You are free to do as you will," Hickory said. "But you took an unnecessary risk to yourself, both by going into the forest and by not informing us of your intent."

"That didn't stop you from coming in after me," I said. It came out like an accusation, because I was in an accusatory mood.

"No," Hickory said.

"So you took it on yourself to follow me around when I didn't give you permission to do so," I said.

"Yes," Hickory said.

"Don't do that again," I said. "I know privacy is an *alien* concept to you, but sometimes I don't want you around. Can you understand

that? You"—I pointed at Dickory—"nearly cut my boyfriend's throat tonight. I know you don't *like* him, but that's a little much."

"Dickory would not have harmed Enzo," Hickory said.

"*Enzo* doesn't know that," I said, and turned back to Dickory. "And what if he had gotten in a good hit on you? You might have hurt him just to keep him down. I don't *need* this kind of protection. And I don't want it."

Hickory and Dickory stood there silently, soaking up my anger. After a couple of seconds, I got bored with this. "Well?" I said.

"You were running out of the forest when you came by us," Hickory said.

"Yeah? So?" I said. "We thought we might be being chased by something. Something spooked the fanties we were watching and Enzo thought it might have been a predator or something. It was a false alarm. There was nothing behind us or else it would have caught up with us when you two leaped out of nowhere and scared the crap out of all of us."

"No," Hickory said.

"No? You *didn't* scare the crap out of us?" I said. "I beg to differ."

"No," Hickory said. "You were being followed."

"What are you talking about?" I said. "There was nothing behind us."

"They were in the trees," Hickory said. "They were pacing you from above. Moving ahead of you. We heard them before we heard you."

I felt weak. "Them?" I said.

"It is why we took you as soon as we heard you coming," Hickory said. "To protect you."

"What were they?" I asked.

"We don't know," Hickory said. "We did not have the time to make any good observation. And we believe your friend's gunshot scared them off."

"So it wasn't necessarily something hunting us," I said. "It could have been anything."

"Perhaps," Hickory said, in that studiously neutral way it had when it didn't want to disagree with me. "Whatever they were, they were

moving along with you and your group."

"Guys, I'm tired," I said, because I didn't want to think about any of this anymore, and if I did think about it anymore—about the idea that some pack of creatures was following us in the trees—I might have a collapse right there in the common area. "Can we have this conversation tomorrow?"

"As you wish, Zoë," Hickory said.

"Thank you," I said, and started shuffling off toward my cot. "And remember what I said about not telling my parents."

"We will not tell your parents," Hickory said.

"And remember what I said about not following me," I said. They said nothing to this. I waved at them tiredly and went off to sleep.

I found Enzo outside his family's tent the next morning, reading a book.

"Wow, a real book," I said. "Who did you kill to get that?"

"I borrowed it from one of the Mennonite kids," he said. He showed the spine to me. "*Huckleberry Finn*. You heard of it?"

"You're asking a girl from a planet named Huckleberry if she's heard of *Huckleberry Finn*," I said. I hoped the incredulous tone of my voice would convey amusement.

Apparently not. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't make the connection." He flipped the book open to where he had been reading.

"Listen," I said. "I wanted to thank you. For what you did last night."

Enzo looked up over his book. "I didn't do anything last night."

"You stayed behind Gretchen and me," I said. "You put yourself between us and whatever was following us. I just wanted you to know I appreciated it."

Enzo shrugged. "Not that there was anything following us after all," he said. I thought about telling him about what Hickory told me, but kept it in. "And when something did come out at you, it was ahead of me. So I wasn't much help, actually."

"Yeah, about that," I said. "I wanted to apologize for that. For the thing with Dickory." I didn't really know how to put that. I figured

saying *Sorry for when my alien bodyguard very nearly took your head off with a knife* wouldn't really go over well.

"Don't worry about it," Enzo said.

"I do worry about it," I said.

"Don't," Enzo said. "Your bodyguard did its job." For a second it seemed like Enzo would say something more, but then he cocked his head and looked at me like he was waiting for me to wrap up whatever it was I was doing, so he could get back to his very important book.

It suddenly occurred to me that Enzo hadn't written me any poetry since we landed on Roanoke.

"Well, okay then," I said, lamely. "I guess I'll see you a little later, then."

"Sounds good," Enzo said, and then gave me a friendly wave and put his nose into Huck Finn's business. I walked back to my tent and found Babar inside and went over to him and gave him a hug.

"Congratulate me, Babar," I said. "I think I just had my first fight with my boyfriend."

Babar licked my face. That made it a little better. But not much.

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FOURTEEN

"No, you're still too low," I said to Gretchen. "It's making you flat. You need to be a note higher or something. Like this." I sang the part I wanted her to sing.

"I *am* singing that," Gretchen said.

"No, you're singing lower than that," I said.

"Then *you're* singing the wrong note," Gretchen said. "Because I'm singing the note you're singing. Go ahead, sing it."

I cleared my throat, and sang the note I wanted her to sing. She matched it perfectly. I stopped singing and listened to Gretchen. She was flat.

"Well, nuts," I said.

"I told you," Gretchen said.

"If I could pull up the song for you, you could hear the note and sing it," I said.

"If you could pull up the song, we wouldn't be trying to sing it at all," Gretchen said. "We'd just listen to it, like civilized human beings."

"Good point," I said.

"There's nothing good about it," Gretchen said. "I swear to you, Zoë. I knew coming to a colony world was going to be hard. I was ready for that. But if I knew they were going to take my PDA, I might have just stayed back on Erie. Go ahead, call me shallow."

"Shallow," I said.

"Now tell me I'm *wrong*," Gretchen said. "I dare you."

I didn't tell her she was wrong. I knew how she felt. Yes, it *was* shallow to admit that you missed your PDA. But when you'd spent your whole life able to call up everything you wanted to amuse you on a PDA—music, shows, books and friends—when you had to part with it, it made you miserable. Really miserable. Like "trapped on a desert island with nothing but coconuts to bang together" miserable. Because there was nothing to replace it with. Yes, the Colonial Mennonites had brought their own small library of printed books, but most of that consisted of Bibles and agricultural manuals and a few "classics," of which *Huckleberry Finn* was one of the more recent volumes. As for popular music and entertainments, well, they didn't much truck with that.

You could tell a few of the Colonial Mennonite teens thought it was funny to watch the rest of us go through entertainment withdrawal. Didn't seem very Christian of them, I have to say. On the other hand, they weren't the ones whose lives had been drastically altered by landing on Roanoke. If I were in their shoes and watching a whole bunch of other people whining and moaning about how horrible it was that their toys were taken away, I might feel a little smug, too.

We did what people do in situations where they go without: We adjusted. I hadn't read a book since we landed on Roanoke, but was on the waiting list for a bound copy of *The Wizard of Oz*. There were no recorded shows or entertainments but Shakespeare never fails; there was a reader's theater performance of *Twelfth Night* planned for a week from Sunday. It promised to be fairly gruesome—I'd heard some of the read-throughs—but Enzo was reading the part of Sebastian, and he was doing well enough, and truth be told it would be the first time I would have ever experienced a Shakespeare play—or any play other than a school pageant—live. And it's not like there would be anything else to do anyway.

And as for music, well, this is what happened: Within a couple days of landing a few of the colonists hauled out guitars and accordions and hand drums and other such instruments and started trying to play together. Which went horribly, because nobody knew anyone else's music. It was like what happened on the *Magellan*. So they started teaching each other their songs, and then people showed up to sing

them, and then people showed up to listen. And thus it was, at the very tail end of space, when no one was looking, the colony of Roanoke reinvented the "hootenanny." Which is what Dad called it. I told him it was a stupid name for it, and he said he agreed, but said that the other word for it—"wingding"—was worse. I couldn't argue with that.

The Roanoke Hootenanners (as they were now calling themselves) took requests—but only if the person requesting sang the song. And if the musicians didn't know the song, you'd have to sing it at least a couple of times until they could figure out how to fake it. This led to an interesting development: singers started doing a cappella versions of their favorite songs, first by themselves and increasingly in groups, which might or might not be accompanied by the Hootenanners. It was becoming a point of pride for people to show up with their favorite songs already arranged, so everyone else in the audience didn't have to suffer through a set of dry runs before it was all listenable.

It was safe to say that some of these arrangements were more *arranged* than others, to put it politely, and some folks sang with the same vocal control as a cat in a shower. But now, a couple of months after the hootenannies had begun, people were beginning to get the hang of it. And people had begun coming to the hoots with new songs, arranged a cappella. One of the most popular songs at the recent hoots was "Let Me Drive the Tractor"—the tale of a colonist being taught to drive a manual tractor by a Mennonite, who, because they were the only ones who knew how to operate noncomputerized farm machinery, had been put in charge of planting crops and teaching the rest of us how to use their equipment. The song ends with the tractor going into a ditch. It was based on a true story. The Mennonites thought the song was pretty funny, even though it came at the cost of a wrecked tractor.

Songs about tractors were a long way from what any of us had been listening to before, but then, we were a long way from where any of us were before, in any sense, so maybe that fit. And to get all sociological about it, maybe what it meant was that twenty or fifty standard years down the line, whenever the Colonial Union decided to let us get in contact with the rest of the human race, Roanoke would have its own

distinct musical form. Maybe they'll call it Roanokapella. Or Hootenoke. Or *something.*

But at this particular moment, all I was trying to do was to get the right note for Gretchen to sing so she and I could go to the next hoot with a halfway decent version of "Delhi Morning" for the Hootenanners to pick up on. And I was failing miserably. This is what it feels like when you realize that, despite a song being your favorite of maybe all time, you don't actually know every little nook and cranny of it. And since my copy of the song was on my PDA, which I could no longer use or even had anymore, there was no way to correct this problem.

Unless. "I have an idea," I said to Gretchen.

"Does it involve you learning to sing on key?" Gretchen asked.

"Even better," I said.

Ten minutes later we were on the other side of Croatoan, standing in front of the village's information center—the one place on the entire planet that you'd still find a functioning piece of electronics, because the inside was designed to completely block any radio or other signals of any sort. The technology to do this, sadly, was rare enough that we only had enough of it for a converted cargo container. The good news was, they were making more. The bad news was, they were only making enough for a medical bay. Sometimes life stinks. Gretchen and I walked into the receiving area, which was pitch black because of the signal-cloaking material; you had to close the outer door to the information center before you could open the inner door. So for about a second and a half it was like being swallowed by grim, black, featureless death. Not something I'd recommend.

And then we opened the inner door and found a geek inside. He looked at the both of us, a little surprised, and then got that *no* look.

"The answer is no," he said, confirming the look.

"Aw, Mr. Bennett," I said. "You don't even know what we're going to ask."

"Well, let's see," said Jerry Bennett. "Two teenage girls—daughters of the colony leaders, incidentally—just *happen* to walk into the only place in the colony where one could play with a PDA. Hmmm. Are they here to beg to play with a PDA? Or are they here because they

enjoy the company of a chunky, middle-aged man? This is not a hard question, Miss Perry."

"We just want to listen to one song," I said. "We'll be out of your hair in just a minute."

Bennett sighed. "You know, at least a couple times a day someone just like you gets the bright idea to come in here and ask if I could just let them borrow a PDA to watch a movie, or listen to some music or read a book. And, oh, it'll just take a minute. I won't even notice they're there. And if I say yes, then other people will come in asking for the same time. Eventually I'll spend so much time helping people with their PDAs that I won't have time to do the work your parents, Miss Perry, have assigned me to do. So you tell me: What should I do?"

"Get a lock?" said Gretchen.

Bennett glanced over to Gretchen, sourly. "Very amusing," he said.

"What are you doing for my parents?" I asked.

"Your parents are having me slowly and painstakingly locate and print every single Colonial Union administration memo and file, so they can refer to them without having to come in here and bother me," Bennett said. "In one sense I appreciate that, but in a more immediate sense I've been doing it for the last three days and I'm likely to be doing it for another four. And since the printer I have to work with jams on a regular basis, it does actually require someone to pay attention to it. And that's me. So there you have it, Miss Perry: Four years of technical education and twenty years of professional work have allowed me to become a printer monkey at the very ass end of space. Truly, my life's goal has been achieved."

I shrugged. "So let us do it," I said.

"I beg your pardon," Bennett said.

"If all you're doing is making sure the printer doesn't jam, that's something we could do for you," I said. "We'll work for you for a couple of hours, and in exchange you let us use a couple of PDAs while we're here. And then you can do whatever else you need to do."

"Or just go have lunch," Gretchen said. "Surprise your wife."

Bennett was silent for a minute, considering. "Offering to actually *help* me," he said. "No one's tried that tactic before. Very sneaky."

"We try," I said.

"And it is lunchtime," Bennett said. "And it is just printing."

"It is," I agreed.

"I suppose if you mess things up horribly it won't be too bad for me," Bennett said. "Your parents won't punish me for your incompetence."

"Nepotism working for you," I said.

"Not that there will be a problem," Gretchen said.

"No," I agreed. "We're excellent printer monkeys."

"All right," Bennett said, and reached across his worktable to grab his PDA. "You can use my PDA. You know how to use this?"

I gave him a look.

"Sorry. Okay." He punched up a queue of files on the display. "These are files that need to go through today. The printer is there"—he motioned to the far end of the worktable—"and the paper is in that bin. Feed it into the printer, stack the finished documents next to the printer. If it jams, and it will, several times, just yank out the paper and let it autofeed a new one. It'll automatically reprint the last page it was working on. While you're doing that you can sync up to the Entertainment archive. I downloaded all those files into one place."

"You downloaded everyone's files?" I asked, and felt ever so slightly violated.

"Relax," Bennett said. "Only public files are accessible. As long as you encrypted your private files before you turned in your PDA, like you were told to, your secrets are safe. Now, once you access a music file the speakers will kick on. Don't turn them up too high or you won't be able to hear the printer jam."

"You have speakers already set up?" Gretchen asked.

"Yes, Miss Trujillo," Bennett said. "Believe it or not, even chunky middle-aged men like to listen to music."

"I know that," Gretchen said. "My dad loves his."

"And on that ego-deflating note, I'll be off," Bennett said. "I'll be back in a couple of hours. Please don't destroy the place. And if anyone comes in asking if they can borrow a PDA, tell them the answer is no, and no exceptions." He set off.

"I hope he was being ironic there," I said.

"Don't care," Gretchen said, and grabbed for the PDA. "Give me that."

"Hey," I said, holding it away from her. "First things first." I set up the printer, queued the files, and then accessed "Delhi Morning." The opening strains flowed out of the speakers and I soaked them in. I swear I almost cried.

"It's amazing how badly you remembered this song," Gretchen said, about halfway though.

"Shhhhh," I said. "Here's that part."

She saw the expression on my face and kept quiet until the song was done.

Two hours is *not* enough time with a PDA if you haven't had access to one in months. And that's all I'm going to say about that. But it was enough time that both Gretchen and I came out of the information center feeling just like we'd spent hours soaking in a nice hot bath—which, come to think of it, was something that we hadn't done for months either.

"We should keep this to ourselves," Gretchen said.

"Yes," I said. "Don't want people to bug Mr. Bennett."

"No, I just like having something over everyone else," Gretchen said.

"There aren't a lot of people who can carry off petty," I said. "Yet somehow you do."

Gretchen nodded. "Thank you, madam. And now I need to get back home. I promised Dad I'd weed the vegetable garden before it got dark."

"Have fun rooting in the dirt," I said.

"Thanks," Gretchen said. "If you were feeling nice, you could always offer to help me."

"I'm working on my evil," I said.

"Be that way," Gretchen said.

"But let's get together after dinner tonight to practice," I said. "Now that we know how to sing that part."

"Sounds good," Gretchen said. "Or will, hopefully." She waved and headed off toward home. I looked around and decided today would be a good day for a walk.

And it was. The sun was up, the day was bright, particularly after a couple of hours in the light-swallowing information center, and Roanoke was deep into spring—which was really pretty, even if it turned out that all the native blooms smelled like rotten meat dipped in sewer sauce (that description courtesy of Magdy, who could string together a phrase now and then). But after a couple of months, you stop noticing the smell, or at least accept there's nothing you can do about it. When the whole planet smells, you just have to deal with it.

But what really made it a good day for a walk was how much our world has changed in just a couple of months. John and Jane let us all out of Croatoan not too long after Enzo, Gretchen, Magdy and I had our midnight jog, and the colonists had begun to move into the countryside, building homes and farms, helping and learning from the Mennonites who were in charge of our first crops, which were already now growing in the fields. They were genetically engineered to be fast-growing; we'd be having our first harvest in the not too far future. It looked like we were going to survive after all. I walked past these new houses and fields, waving to folks as I went.

Eventually I walked past the last homestead and over a small rise. On the other side of it, nothing but grass and scrub and the forest in a line to the side. This rise was destined to be part of another farm, and more farms and pastures would cut up this little valley even further. It's funny how even just a couple thousand humans could start to change a landscape. But at the moment there was no other person in it but me; it was my private spot, for as long as it lasted. Mine and mine alone. Well, and on a couple of occasions, mine and Enzo's.

I laid back, looked up at the clouds in the sky, and smiled to myself. Maybe we were in hiding at the farthest reaches of the galaxy, but right now, at this moment, things were pretty good. You can be happy anywhere, if you have the right point of view. And the ability to ignore the smell of an entire planet.

"Zoë," said a voice behind me.

I jerked up and then saw Hickory and Dickory. They had just come over the rise.

"Don't *do* that," I said, and got up.

"We wish to speak to you," Hickory said.

"You could do that at home," I said.

"Here is better," Hickory said. "We have concerns."

"Concerns about what?" I said, and rose to look at them. Something wasn't quite right about either of them, and it took me a minute to figure out what it was. "Why aren't you wearing your consciousness modules?" I asked.

"We are concerned about the increasing risks you are taking with your safety," Hickory said, answering the first but not the second of my questions. "And with your safety in a general sense."

"You mean, being here?" I said. "Relax, Hickory. It's broad daylight, and the Hentosz farm is just over the hill. Nothing bad is going to happen to me."

"There are predators here," Hickory said.

"There are *yotes,*" I said, naming the dog-sized carnivores that we'd found lurking around Croatoan. "I can handle a yote."

"They move in packs," Hickory said.

"Not during the day," I said.

"You do not only come here in the day," Hickory said. "Nor do you always come alone."

I reddened a bit at that, and thought about getting angry with Hickory. But it wasn't wearing its consciousness. Getting angry with it wouldn't do anything. "I thought I told the two of you not to follow me when I want to have some private time," I said, as evenly as I could.

"We do not follow you," Hickory said. "But neither are we stupid. We know where you go and with whom. Your lack of care is putting you at risk, and you do not always allow us to accompany you anymore. We cannot protect you as we would prefer to, and are expected to."

"We have been here for months, guys." I said. "There hasn't been a single attack on anyone by anything."

"You would have been attacked that night in the woods had Dickory and I not come to find you," Hickory said. "Those were not

yotes in the trees that night. Yotes cannot climb or move through trees."

"And you'll notice I'm nowhere near the forest," I said, and waved in the direction of the tree line. "And whatever was in there doesn't seem to come out here, because we'd have seen them by now if they did. We've been over this before, Hickory."

"It is not only the predators here that concern us," Hickory said.

"I'm not following you," I said.

"This colony is being searched for," Hickory said.

"If you saw the video, you'll remember that this Conclave group blasted that colony from the sky," I said. "If the Conclave finds us, I don't think even you are going to be able to do much to protect me."

"It is not the Conclave we are concerned about," Hickory said.

"You're the only ones, then," I said.

"The Conclave is not the only one who will seek this colony," Hickory said. "Others will search for it, to win favor from the Conclave, or to thwart it, or to take the colony for its own. They will not blast this colony from the sky. They will take it in the standard fashion. Invasion and slaughter."

"What is with the two of you today?" I said. I was trying to lighten the mood.

I failed. "And then there is the matter of who you are," Hickory said.

"What does that mean?" I said.

"You should know well," Hickory said. "You are not merely the daughter of the colony leaders. You are also important to *us.* To the Obin. That fact is not unknown, Zoë. You have been used as a bargaining chip your entire life. We Obin used you to bargain with your father to build us consciousness. You are a treaty condition between the Obin and the Colonial Union. We have no doubt that any who would attack this colony would try to take you in order to bargain with the Obin. Even the Conclave could be tempted to do this. Or they would kill you to wound us. To kill a symbol of ourselves."

"That's crazy," I said.

"It has happened before," Hickory said.

"What?" I said.

"When you lived on Huckleberry, there were no fewer than six attempts to capture or kill you," Hickory said. "The last just a few days before you left Huckleberry."

"And you never *told* me this?" I asked.

"It was decided by both your government and ours that neither you nor your parents needed to know," Hickory said. "You were a child, and your parents wished to give you as unremarkable a life as possible. The Obin wished to be able to provide them that. None of these attempts came close to success. We stopped each long before you would have been in danger. And in each case the Obin government expressed its displeasure with the races who made such attempts on your well-being."

I shuddered at that. The Obin were not people to make enemies of.

"We would not have told you at all—and we have violated our standing orders not to do so—were we not in our current situation," Hickory said. "We are cut off from the systems we had in place to keep you safe. And you are becoming increasingly independent in your actions and resentful of our presence in your life."

Those last words hit me like a slap. "I'm not resentful," I said. "I just want my own time. I'm sorry if that hurts you."

"We are not hurt," Hickory said. "We have responsibilities. How we fulfill those responsibilities must adapt to circumstance. We are making an adaptation now."

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

"It is time for you to learn how to defend yourself," Hickory said. "You want to be more independent from us, and we do not have all the resources we once had to keep you safe. We have always intended to teach you to fight. Now, for both of those reasons, it is necessary to begin that training."

"What do you mean, teach me to fight?" I asked.

"We will teach you to defend yourself physically," Hickory said. "To disarm an opponent. To use weapons. To immobilize your enemy. To kill your enemy if necessary."

"You want to teach me how to kill other people," I said.

"It is necessary," Hickory said.

"I'm not sure John and Jane would approve of that," I said.

"Major Perry and Lieutenant Sagan both know how to kill," Hickory said. "Both, in their military service, have killed others when it was necessary for their survival."

"But it doesn't mean that they want *me* to know," I said. "And also, I don't know that *I* want to know. You say you need to adapt how you fulfill your responsibilities. Fine. Figure out how to adapt them. But I'm not going to learn how to *kill* something else so you can feel like you're doing a better job doing something I'm not even sure I *want* you to do anymore."

"You do not wish us to defend you," Hickory said. "Or learn to defend yourself."

"I don't *know*!" I said. I yelled it in exasperation. "Okay? I hate having my face pushed into all of this. That I'm some special *thing* that needs to be defended. Well, you know what? *Everyone* here needs to be defended, Hickory. We're *all* in danger. Any minute hundreds of ships could show up over our heads and kill us all. I'm sick of it. I try to forget about it a little every now and then. That's what I was doing out here before the two of you showed up to crap over it all. So thank you very much for *that.*"

Hickory and Dickory said nothing to that. If they had been wearing their consciousness, they'd probably be all twitchy and overloaded at that last outburst. But they were just standing there, impassive.

I counted to five and tried to get myself back under control. "Look," I said, in what I hoped was a more reasonable tone of voice. "Give me a couple of days to think about this, all right? You've dropped a lot on me all at once. Let me work it through in my head."

They still said nothing.

"Fine," I said. "I'm heading back." I brushed past Hickory.

And found myself on the ground.

I rolled and looked up at Hickory, confused. "What the hell?" I said, and made to stand up.

Dickory, who had moved behind me, roughly pushed me back into the grass and dirt.

I scrambled backward from the two of them. "Stop it," I said.

They drew their combat knives, and came toward me.

I grunted out a scream and bolted upright, running at full speed toward the top of the hill, toward the Hentosz farm. But Obin can run faster than humans. Dickory flanked me, got in front of me, and drew back its knife. I backpedaled, falling backward as I did. Dickory lunged. I screamed and rolled again and sprinted back down the side of the hill I came up.

Hickory was waiting for me and moving to intercept me. I tried to fake going left but it was having none of it, and grabbed for me, getting a grip on my left forearm. I hit at it with my right fist. Hickory deflected it easily, and then in a quick reversal slapped me sharply on the temple, releasing me as it did so. I staggered back, stunned. Hickory looped a leg around one of mine and jerked upward, lifting me completely off the ground. I fell backward and landed on my head. A white blast of pain flooded my skull, and all I could do was lie there, dazed.

There was heavy pressure on my chest. Hickory was kneeling on me, immobilizing me. I clawed desperately at it, but it held its head away from me on its long neck and ignored everything else. I shouted for help as loudly as I could, knowing no one could hear me, and yelling anyway.

I looked over and saw Dickory, standing to the side. "Please," I said. Dickory said nothing. And could feel nothing. Now I knew why the two of them came to see me without their consciousness.

I grabbed at Hickory's leg, on my chest, and tried to push it off. It pushed it in harder, offered another disorienting slap with one hand, and with the other raised it and then plunged it toward my head in one terrible and fluid move. I screamed.

"You are unharmed," Hickory said, at some point. "You may get up."

I stayed on the ground, not moving, eyes turned toward Hickory's knife, buried in the ground so close to my head that I couldn't actually focus on it. Then I propped myself up on my elbows, turned away from the knife, and threw up.

Hickory waited until I was done. "We offer no apology for this," it said. "And will accept whatever consequences for it that you may choose. Know only this: You were not physically harmed. You are

unlikely even to bruise. We made sure of this. For all of that you were at our mercy in seconds. Others who will come for you will not show you such consideration. They will not hold back. They will not stop. They will have no concern for you. They will not show you mercy. They will seek to kill you. And they will succeed. We knew you would not believe us if we only told you this. We had to show you."

I rose to my feet, barely able to stay upright, and staggered back from the two of them as best I could. "God *damn* you," I said. "God damn you both. You stay away from me from now on." I headed back to Croatoan. As soon as my legs could do it, I started running.

"Hey," Gretchen said, coming into the information center and sealing the inside door behind her. "Mr. Bennett said I could find you here."

"Yeah," I said. "I asked him if I could be his printer monkey a little more today."

"Couldn't keep away from the music?" Gretchen said, trying to make a little joke.

I shook my head and showed her what I was looking at.

"These are classified files, Zoë," she said. "CDF intelligence reports. You're going to get in trouble if anyone ever finds out. And Bennett definitely won't let you back in here."

"I don't *care,*" I said, and my voice cracked enough that Gretchen looked at me in alarm. "I have to know how bad it is. I have to know who's out there and what they want from us. From *me.* Look." I took the PDA and pulled a file on General Gau, the leader of the Conclave, the one who ordered the destruction of the colony on the video file. "This general is going to kill us all if he finds us, and we know *next to nothing* about him. What makes someone do this? Killing innocent people? What happened in his life that gets him to a place where wiping out entire planets seems like a good idea? Don't you think we should know? And we don't. We've got statistics on his military service and that's it." I tossed the PDA back on the table, carelessly, alarming Gretchen. "I want to know *why* this general wants me to die. Why he wants us *all* to die. Don't you?" I put my hand on my forehead and slumped a little against the worktable.

"Okay," Gretchen said, after a minute. "I think you need to tell me what happened to you today. Because this is not how you were when I left you this afternoon."

I glanced over at Gretchen, stifled a laugh, and then broke down and started crying. Gretchen came over to give me a hug, and after a good long while, I told her everything. And I do mean everything.

She was quiet after I had unloaded. "Tell me what you're thinking," I said.

"If I tell you, you're going to hate me," she said.

"Don't be silly," I said. "I'm not going to hate you."

"I think they're right," she said. "Hickory and Dickory."

"I hate you," I said.

She pushed me lightly. "Stop that," she said. "I don't mean they were right to attack you. That was just over the line. But, and don't take this the wrong way, you're not an ordinary girl."

"That's not true," I said. "Do you see me acting any different than anyone else? Ever? Do I hold myself out as someone special? Have you ever once heard me talk about any of this to people?"

"They know anyway," Gretchen said.

"I know that," I said. "But it doesn't come from *me.* I work at being normal."

"Okay, you're a perfectly normal girl," Gretchen said.

"Thank you," I said.

"A perfectly normal girl who's had six attempted assassinations," Gretchen said.

"But that's not *me,*" I said, poking myself in the chest. "It's *about* me. About someone else's *idea* of who I am. And that doesn't matter to me."

"It would matter to you if you were dead," Gretchen said, and then held her hand up before I could respond. "And it would matter to your parents. It would matter to me. I'm pretty sure it would matter to Enzo. And it seems like it would matter a whole lot to a couple billion aliens. Think about *that.* Someone even thinks about coming after you, they bomb a planet."

"I don't want to think about it," I said.

"I know," Gretchen said. "But I don't think you have a choice anymore. No matter what you do, you're still who you are, whether you want to be or not. You can't change it. You've got to work with it."

"Thanks for that uplifting message," I said.

"I'm trying to help," Gretchen said.

I sighed. "I know, Gretchen. I'm sorry. I don't mean to bite your head off. I'm just getting tired of having my life be about other people's choices for me."

"This makes you different than any of the rest of us how, exactly?" Gretchen asked.

"My *point,*" I said. "I'm a perfectly normal girl. Thank you for finally noticing."

"Perfectly normal," Gretchen agreed. "Except for being Queen of the Obin."

"Hate you," I said.

Gretchen grinned.

"Miss Trujillo said that you wanted to see us," Hickory said. Dickory and Gretchen, who had gotten the two Obin for me, stood to its side. We were standing on the hill where my bodyguards had attacked me a few days earlier.

"Before I say anything else, you should know I am still incredibly angry at you," I said. "I don't know that I will ever forgive you for attacking me, even if I understand why you did it, and why you thought you had to. I want to make sure you know that. And I want to make sure you *feel* it." I pointed to Hickory's consciousness collar, secure around its neck.

"We feel it," Hickory said, its voice quivering. "We feel it enough that we debated whether we could turn our consciousness back on. The memory is almost too painful to bear."

I nodded. I wanted to say *good,* but I knew it was the wrong thing to say, and that I would regret saying it. Didn't mean I couldn't *think* it, though, for the moment, anyway.

"I'm not going to ask you to apologize," I said. "I know you won't. But I want your word you will never do something like that again," I

said.

"You have our word," Hickory said.

"Thank you," I said. I didn't expect they would do something like that again. That sort of thing works once if it works at all. But that wasn't the point. What I wanted was to feel like I could trust the two of them again. I wasn't there yet.

"Will you train?" Hickory asked.

"Yes," I said. "But I have two conditions." Hickory waited. "The first is that Gretchen trains with me."

"We had not prepared to train anyone other than you," Hickory said.

"I don't care," I said. "Gretchen is my best friend. I'm not going to learn how to save myself and not share that with her. And besides, I don't know if you've noticed, but the two of you aren't exactly human shaped. I think it will help to practice with another human as well as with you. But this is nonnegotiable. If you won't train Gretchen, I won't train. This is my choice. This is my condition."

Hickory turned to Gretchen. "Will you train?"

"Only if Zoë does," she said. "She's my best friend, after all."

Hickory looked over to me. "She has your sense of humor," it said.

"I hadn't noticed," I said.

Hickory turned back to Gretchen. "It will be very difficult," it said.

"I know," Gretchen said. "Count me in anyway."

"What is the other condition?" Hickory asked me.

"I'm doing this for the two of you," I said. "This learning to fight. I don't want it for myself. I don't think I need it. But you think I need it, and you've never asked me to do something you didn't know was important. So I'll do it. But now you have to do something for me. Something I want."

"What is it that you want?" Hickory asked.

"I want you to learn how to sing," I said, and gestured to Gretchen. "You teach us to fight, we teach you to sing. For the hootenannies."

"Sing," Hickory said.

"Yes, sing," I said. "People are still frightened of the two of you. And no offense, but you're not brimming with personality. But if we

can get the four of us to do a song or two at the hootenannies, it could go a long way to making people comfortable with you."

"We have never sung," Hickory said.

"Well, you never wrote stories before either," I said. "And you wrote one of those. It's just like that. Except with singing. And then people wouldn't wonder why Gretchen and I are off with the two of you. Come on, Hickory, it'll be fun."

Hickory looked doubtful, and a funny thought came to me: *Maybe Hickory is shy.* Which seemed almost ridiculous; someone about to teach another person sixteen different ways to kill getting stage fright singing.

"I would like to sing," Dickory said. We all turned to Dickory in amazement.

"It speaks!" Gretchen said.

Hickory clicked something to Dickory in their native tongue; Dickory clicked back. Hickory responded, and Dickory replied, it seemed a bit forcefully. And then, God help me, Hickory actually *sighed.*

"We will sing," Hickory said.

"Excellent," I said.

"We will begin training tomorrow," Hickory said.

"Okay," I said. "But let's start singing practice today. Now."

"Now?" Hickory said.

"Sure," I said. "We're all here. And Gretchen and I have just the song for you."

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FIFTEEN

The next several months were very tiring.

Early mornings: physical conditioning.

"You are soft," Hickory said to me and Gretchen the first day.

"Despicable lies," I said.

"Very well," Hickory said, and pointed to the tree line of the forest, at least a klick away. "Please run to the forest as quickly as you can. Then run back. Do not stop until you return."

We ran. By the time I got back, it felt like my lungs were trying to force themselves up my trachea, the better to smack me around for abusing them. Both Gretchen and I collapsed into the grass gasping.

"You are soft," Hickory repeated. I didn't argue, and not just because at the moment I was totally incapable of speaking. "We are done for today. Tomorrow we will truly begin with your physical conditioning. We will start slowly." It and Dickory walked away, leaving Gretchen and me to imagine ways we were going to murder Hickory and Dickory, once we could actually force oxygen back into our bodies.

Mornings: school, like every other kid and teen not actively working in a field. Limited books and supplies meant sharing with others. I shared my textbooks with Gretchen, Enzo, and Magdy. This worked fine when we were all speaking to each other, less so when some of us were not.

"Will you two *please* focus?" Magdy said, waving his hands in front of the two of us. We were supposed to be doing calculus.

“Stop it,” Gretchen said. She had her head down on our table. It had been a hard workout that morning. “God, I miss coffee,” she said, looking up at me.

“It would be nice to get to this problem sometime today,” Magdy said.

“Oh, what do you care,” Gretchen said. “It’s not like any of us are going to college anyway.”

“We still have to do it,” Enzo said.

“You do it, then,” Gretchen said. She leaned over and pushed the book toward the two of them. “It’s not me or Zoë who has to learn this stuff. We already know it. You two are always waiting for us to do the work, and then just nodding like you actually know what we’re doing.”

“That’s not true,” Magdy said.

“Really? Fine,” Gretchen said. “Prove it. Impress me.”

“I think someone’s morning exertions are making her a little grumpy,” Magdy said, mockingly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I said.

“It means that since the two of you started whatever it is you’re doing, you’ve been pretty useless here,” Magdy said. “Despite what Gretchen the Grump is hinting at, it’s the two of us who have been carrying the two of you lately, and you know it.”

“You’re carrying us in math?” Gretchen said. “I don’t think so.”

“Everything else, sweetness,” Magdy said. “Unless you think Enzo pulling together that report on the early Colonial Union days last week doesn’t count.”

“That’s not ‘we,’ that’s Enzo,” Gretchen said. “And thank you, Enzo. Happy, Magdy? Good. Now let’s all shut up about this.” Gretchen put her head back down on the table. Enzo and Magdy looked at each other.

“Here, give me the book,” I said, reaching for it. “I’ll do this problem.” Enzo slid the book over to me, not quite meeting my gaze.

Afternoons: training.

“So, how is the training going?” Enzo asked me one early evening, catching me as I limped home from the day’s workout.

“Do you mean, can I kill you yet?” I asked.

"Well, no," Enzo said. "Although now that you mention it I'm curious. Can you?"

"It depends," I said, "on what it is you're asking me to kill you with." There was an uncomfortable silence after that. "That was a joke," I said.

"Are you sure?" Enzo said.

"We didn't even get around to how to kill things today," I said, changing the subject. "We spent the day learning how to move quietly. You know. To avoid capture."

"Or to sneak up on something," Enzo said.

I sighed. "Yes, okay, Enzo. To sneak up on things. To kill them. Because I like to kill. Kill and kill again, that's me. Little Zoë Stab Stab." I sped up my walking speed.

Enzo caught up with me. "Sorry," he said. "That wasn't fair of me."

"Really," I said.

"It's just a topic of conversation, you know," Enzo said. "What you and Gretchen are doing."

I stopped walking. "What kind of conversation?" I asked.

"Well, think about it," Enzo said. "You and Gretchen are spending your afternoons preparing for the apocalypse. What do you think people are talking about?"

"It's not like that," I said.

"I know," Enzo said, reaching out and touching my arm, which reminded me we spent less time touching each other lately. "I've told people that, too. Doesn't keep people from talking, though. That and the fact that it's you *and* Gretchen."

"So?" I said.

"You're the daughter of the colony leaders, she's the daughter of the guy everyone knows is next in line on the colony council," Enzo said. "It looks like you're getting special treatment. If it was just you, people would get it. People know you've got that weird thing you have with the Obin—"

"It's not weird," I said.

Enzo looked at me blankly.

"Yeah, okay," I said.

"People know you've got that thing with the Obin, so they wouldn't think about it if it was just you," Enzo said. "But the two of you is making people nervous. People wonder if you guys know something we don't."

"That's ridiculous," I said. "Gretchen is my best friend. That's why I asked her. Should I have asked someone else?"

"You could have," Enzo said.

"Like who?" I said.

"Like me," Enzo said. "You know, your boyfriend."

"Yeah, because people wouldn't talk about *that*," I said.

"Maybe they would and maybe they wouldn't," Enzo said. "But at least I'd get to see you every once in a while."

I didn't have any good answer to that. So I just gave Enzo a kiss.

"Look, I'm not trying to make you feel bad or guilty or whatever," Enzo said, when I was done. "But I would like to see more of you."

"That statement can be interpreted in many different ways," I said.

"Let's start with the innocent ones," Enzo said. "But we can go from there if you want."

"And anyway, you see me every day," rewinding the conversation just a little. "And we always spend time together at the hootenannies."

"I don't count doing schoolwork together as time together," Enzo said. "And as much fun as it is to admire how you trained Hickory to imitate a sitar solo—"

"That's Dickory," I said. "Hickory does the drum sounds."

Enzo gently put a finger to my lips. "As much fun as it is," he repeated. "I'd rather have some time for just you and me." He kissed me, which was pretty effective punctuation.

"How about now?" I said, after the kiss.

"Can't," Enzo said. "On my way home to babysit Maria and Katherina so my parents can have dinner with friends."

"Waaah," I said. "Kiss me, tell me you want to spend time together, leave me hanging. Nice."

"But I have tomorrow afternoon free," Enzo said. "Maybe then. After you're done with your stabbing practice."

"We already did stabbing," I said. "Now we're on to strangulation."

Silence.

"Joke," I said.

"I only have your word for that," Enzo said.

"Cute." I kissed him again. "See you tomorrow."

The next day training went long. I skipped dinner to head to Enzo's parents' homestead. His mother said he'd waited around, and then headed over to Magdy's. We didn't talk to each other much the next day during school.

Evenings: study.

"We have reached an agreement with Jerry Bennett to allow you to use the information center in the evenings twice a week," Hickory said.

I suddenly felt sorry for Jerry Bennett, who I had heard was more than a little terrified of Hickory and Dickory, and probably would have agreed to anything they asked just so long as they left him alone. I made a mental note to invite Bennett to the next hootenanny. There's nothing to make an Obin look less threatening than to see one in front of a crowd, bobbing its neck back and forth and making like a tabla drum.

Hickory continued. "While you are there, you will study the Colonial Union files of other sentient species."

"Why do you want us to learn about them?" Gretchen asked.

"To know how to fight them," Hickory said. "And how to kill them."

"There are hundreds of species in the Conclave," I said. "Are we supposed to learn about each of them? That's going to take more than two nights a week."

"We will be focusing on species who are not members of the Conclave," Hickory said.

Gretchen and I looked at each other. "But they're not the ones planning to kill us," Gretchen said.

"There are many trying to kill you," Hickory said. "And some may be more motivated than others. For example, the Rraey. They recently lost a war with the Enesha, who took control of most of their colonies before they were themselves defeated by the Obin. The Rraey are no longer a direct threat to any established race or colony. But if they were to find you here, there is no doubt what they would do."

I shuddered. Gretchen noticed. "You okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine," I said, too quickly. "I've met the Rraey before." Gretchen looked at me strangely but didn't say anything after that.

"We have a list for you," Hickory said. "Jerry Bennett has already prepared the files you have access to for each species. Take special note of the physiology of each race. This will be important in our instruction."

"To learn how to fight them," I said.

"Yes," Hickory said. "And to learn how to kill them."

Three weeks into our studies I pulled up a race who were not on our list.

"Wow, they're scary-looking," Gretchen said, looking over my shoulder after she noticed I had been reading for a while.

"They're Consu," I said. "They're scary, period." I handed my PDA over to Gretchen. "They're the most advanced race we know about. They make us look like we're banging rocks together. And they're the ones who made the Obin what they are today."

"Genetically engineered them?" Gretchen asked. I nodded. "Well, maybe next time they can code for personality. What are you looking at them for?"

"I'm just curious," I said. "Hickory and Dickory have talked to me about them before. They're the closet thing the Obin have to a higher power."

"Their gods," Gretchen said.

I shrugged. "More like a kid with an ant farm," I said. "An ant farm and a magnifying glass."

"Sounds lovely," Gretchen said, and handed back the PDA. "Hope I never get to meet them. Unless they're on my side."

"They're not on a side," I said. "They're above."

"Above is a side," Gretchen said.

"Not our side," I said, and switched the PDA back to what I was supposed to be reading.

Late evening: everything else.

"Well, this is a surprise," I said to Enzo, who was sitting on my doorstep as I came back from another thrilling night at the information center. "I haven't seen you too much recently."

"You haven't seen much of anybody recently," Enzo said, standing up to greet me. "It's just you and Gretchen. And you've been avoiding me since we broke up the study group."

"I'm not avoiding you," I said.

"You haven't been going out of your way to look for me," Enzo said.

Well, he had me there.

"I don't blame you for it," I said, changing the subject a little. "It's not your fault Magdy threw that fit of his." After several weeks of increased sniping, things between Magdy and Gretchen finally reached toxic levels; the two of them had a shouting match in class and Magdy ended up saying some fairly not forgivable things and then stomping off, Enzo trailing behind. And that was the end of our little band.

"Yeah, it's all Magdy's fault," Enzo said. "Gretchen's poking at him until he snapped didn't have anything to do with it at all."

Already this conversation had gone twice to places I didn't want it to go, and the rational part of my brain was just telling me to let it go and change the subject. But then there was the not quite rational part, which was suddenly getting really annoyed. "So are you hanging out on my doorstep just to dump on my best friend, or is there some other reason you dropped by?"

Enzo opened his mouth to say something, and then just shook his head. "Forget it," he said, and started to walk off.

I blocked his path. "No," I said. "You came here for a reason. Tell me what it is."

"Why don't I see you anymore?" Enzo said.

"Is that what you came here to ask me?" I said.

"No," Enzo said. "It's not what I came here to say. But it's what I'm asking you now. It's been two weeks since Magdy and Gretchen did their thing, Zoë. It was between the two of them, but I've hardly seen you since then. If you're not actually avoiding me, you're faking it really well."

"If it was between Gretchen and Magdy, why did you leave when he did?" I said.

"He's my friend," Enzo said. "Someone had to calm him down. You know how he gets. You know I'm his heat sink. What kind of question

is that?"

"I'm just saying it's not just between Magdy and Gretchen," I said. "It's between all of us. You and me and Gretchen and Magdy. When was the last time you did anything without Magdy?"

"I don't remember him being there when *we* spend time together," Enzo said.

"You know what I mean," I said. "You're always following him, keeping him from getting hit by someone or breaking his neck or doing something stupid."

"I'm not his *puppy*," Enzo said, and for that minute he actually got a little angry. Which was new.

I ignored it. "You're his friend," I said. "His best friend. And Gretchen is mine. And right now our best friends can't stand the sight of each other. And that leaks into *us*, Enzo. Let me ask you, right now, how do you feel about Gretchen? You don't like her very much, do you?"

"We've had better days," Enzo said.

"Right. Because she and your best friend are at it. I feel the same way about Magdy. I guarantee you he feels the same way about me. And Gretchen isn't feeling very friendly to you. I want to spend time with you, Enzo, but most of the time, both of us are a package deal. We come with our best friends attached. And I don't want the drama right now."

"Because it's easier just not to bother," Enzo said.

"Because I'm *tired*, Enzo," I said, spitting out the words. "Okay? I'm *tired*. Every morning I wake up and I have to run or do strength exercises or something that tires me out right after I've gotten out of bed. I'm tired before the rest of you are even *awake*. Then school. Then an entire afternoon of getting physically beat up in order to learn how to defend myself, on the chance some aliens want to come down here and kill us all. Then I spend my evenings reading up on every single race out there, not because it's *interesting*, but just in case I need to *murder* one of them, I'll know where its soft spots are. I hardly have time to think about anything else, Enzo. I am *tired*.

"Do you think all of this is *fun* for me? Do you think it's fun for me not to see you? To spend all my time learning to hurt and kill things?

Do you think it's fun for me that every single day I get my nose rubbed in the fact there's a whole universe out there just waiting to murder us? When was the last time *you* thought about it? When was the last time Magdy thought about it? I think about it *every day*, Enzo. My time is spent doing nothing but. So don't tell me that it's just *easier* for me not to bother with the drama. You have *no* idea. I'm sorry. But you don't."

Enzo stared at me for a minute, and then reached over to wipe my cheeks. "You could *tell* me, you know," he said.

I laughed a small laugh. "I don't have *time*," I said. That got a smile from Enzo. "And anyway, I don't want you to worry."

"It's a little late for that," Enzo said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's all right," he said.

"I miss it, you know," I said, wiping my own face. "Spending time with you. Even when it meant spending time with Magdy. I miss having the time to really talk to you. I miss watching you fail at dodgeball. I miss you sending me poems. I miss *all* of it. I'm sorry that we've gotten mad at each other lately, and that we didn't do something to fix it. I'm sorry and I miss you, Enzo."

"Thank you," Enzo said.

"You're welcome," I said.

We stood there for a minute, looking at each other.

"You came here to break up with me, didn't you," I said, finally.

"Yeah," said Enzo. "Yeah, I did. Sorry."

"Don't be," I said. "I haven't been a very good girlfriend."

"Yes you have," Enzo said. "When you've had the time."

Another shaky laugh from me. "Well, that's the problem, isn't it," I said.

"Yes," Enzo said, and I know he was sorry he felt he had to say it.

And just like that my first relationship was over, and I went to bed, and I didn't sleep.

And then I got up when the sun came up and walked out to our exercise area, and started everything again. Exercise. School. Training. Study.

A very tiring time.

And this is how my days went, most days, for months, until we had been at Roanoke for almost an entire year.

And then things started happening. Fast.

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SIXTEEN

"We're looking for Joe Loong," Jane said, to the assembled search team, at the edge of the forest by Joe's house. Dad, who was standing with her and Savitri, was letting her run the show. "He's been missing for the last two days. Therese Arlien, his companion, tells me that he was excited about the return of the fanties to the area and told her he was thinking of trying to get close to one of the herds. We're working under the assumption that's what he did, and then either got lost, or perhaps got injured by one of the animals."

Jane motioned at the line of trees. "We're going to search the area in teams of four, spreading out in a line from here. Everyone in a group stays in voice contact with the group members on either side; every one at the left or right of a group also stays in voice contact with your opposite number from the next group over. Call to each other every couple of minutes. We'll do this slow and careful; I don't want any of us adding to the number of the lost, understand? If you lose voice contact with the other members of your group, *stop* and stay where you are, and let your group members reestablish contact. If the person next to you doesn't respond when you call, *stop* and alert those you *are* in contact with. Again, let's not lose anyone else, especially when we're trying to find Joe. Now, you all know who we are looking for?"

There were general nods; most of the hundred and fifty or so folks who'd showed up to look for Loong were friends of his. I personally had only the vaguest of ideas of what he looked like, but I was going on the idea that if someone came running toward us, waving his hands and

saying, "Thank God you found me," it was likely to be him. And joining the search party was getting me a day out of school. You can't argue with that.

"All right, then," Mom said. "Let's organize into teams." People started grouping together in fours; I turned to Gretchen and figured she and I would be a team with Hickory and Dickory.

"Zoë," Mom said. "You're with me. Bring Hickory and Dickory."

"Can Gretchen come with us?" I asked.

"No," Jane said. "Too large. Sorry, Gretchen."

"It's all right," Gretchen said to Mom, and then turned back to me. "Try to survive without me," she said.

"Stop," I said. "It's not like we're dating." She grinned and wandered off to join another group.

After several minutes three dozen groups of four were spread out over more than half a klick of tree line. Jane gave the signal and we started in.

Then came the boring: three hours of stomping through the woods, slowly, searching for signs that Joe Loong had wandered in this direction, calling out to each other every few minutes. I found nothing, Mom to my left found nothing, Hickory to my right found nothing, and Dickory to its right found nothing either. Not to be hopelessly shallow about it, but I thought it would be at least a little more interesting than it was.

"Are we going to take a break anytime soon?" I asked Jane, walking up to her when she wandered into visual range.

"You're tired?" she said. "I would think that after all the training you do, a walk in the woods would be an easy thing."

I paused at this comment; I didn't make any secret of my training with Hickory and Dickory—it would be hard to hide, given how much time I gave to it—but it's not something that the two of us talked about much. "It's not a stamina issue," I said. "It's a boredom issue. I've been scanning the forest floor for three hours. I'm getting a little punchy."

Jane nodded. "We'll take a rest soon. If we don't find something in this area in the next hour, I'll regather people on the other side of Joe's homestead and try over there," she said.

"You don't mind me doing what I do with Hickory and Dickory, do you?" I asked. "It's not like I talk about it to you much. Either with you or Dad."

"It worried us the first couple of weeks, when you came in covered with bruises and then went to sleep without actually saying hello to us," Jane said. She kept walking and scanning as she talked. "And I was sorry it broke up your friendship with Enzo. But you're old enough now to make your own choices about what you want to do with your time, and we both decided that we weren't going to breathe down your neck about it."

I was about to say, *Well, it wasn't entirely my own choice to do this*, but Jane kept talking. "Beside that, we think it's smart," she said. "I don't know when we'll be found, but I think we will be. I can take care of myself; John can take care of himself. We were soldiers. We're happy to see that you're learning to take care of yourself, too. When it comes down to it, it might be the thing that makes a difference."

I stopped walking. "Well, *that* was a depressing thing to say," I said.

Jane stopped and came back to me. "I didn't mean it that way," she said.

"You just said I might be alone at the end of all this," I said. "That each of us will have to take care of ourselves. That's not exactly a *happy* thought, you know."

"I didn't mean it that way," Jane said. She reached over and touched the jade elephant pendant she had given me years ago. "John and I will never leave you, Zoë. Never abandon you. You need to know that. It's a promise we made to you. What I am saying is that we will need each other. Knowing how to take care of ourselves means we are better able to help each other. It means that you will be able to help *us*. Think about that, Zoë. Everything might come down to what you are able to do. For us. And for the colony. That's what I'm saying."

"I doubt it's going to come to that," I said.

"Well, I doubt it too," Jane said. "Or at least I hope it doesn't come to that."

"Thanks," I said, wryly.

"You know what I mean," Mom said.

"I do," I said. "I think it's funny how bluntly you put it."

To the left of us there was a faint scream. Jane swiveled in its direction and then turned back to face me; her expression left very little doubt that whatever mom-daughter bonding moment we'd been having was at a very abrupt end. "Stay here," she said. "Send word down the line to halt. Hickory, come with me." The two of them sped off in the direction of the scream quietly at what seemed like an almost impossible high speed; I was suddenly reminded that, yes, in fact, my mom *was* a veteran warrior. There's a thought for you. It was just now I finally had the tools to really appreciate it.

Several minutes later Hickory returned to us, clicked something to Dickory in their native tongue as he passed, and looked at me.

"Lieutenant Sagan says that you are to return to the colony with Dickory," Hickory said.

"Why?" I asked. "Have they found Joe?"

"They have," Hickory said.

"Is he all right?" I asked.

"He is dead," Hickory said. "And Lieutenant Sagan believes there is reason to worry that the search parties may be in danger if they stay out here much longer."

"Why?" I asked. "Because of the fanties? Was he trampled or something?"

Hickory looked at me levelly. "Zoë, you do not need me to remind you of your last trip into the forest and what followed you then."

I went very cold. "No," I said.

"Whatever they are, they appear to follow the fantie herds as they migrate," Hickory said. "They have followed those herds back here. And it appears that they found Joseph Loong in the woods."

"Oh my God," I said. "I have to tell Jane."

"I assure you, she has figured it out," Hickory said. "And I am to find Major Perry now, so he will know presently. This is being taken care of. The lieutenant asks for you to return to Croatoan. As do I. Dickory will accompany you. Go now. And I advise silence until your parents speak of this publicly." Hickory strode off into the distance. I watched it go, and then headed home, fast, Dickory matching my strides, both of us moving quietly, as we had practiced so many times.

The fact that Joe Loong was dead spread fast in the colony. Rumors of *how* he died spread even faster. Gretchen and I sat in front of Croatoan's community center and watched a revolving cast of rumormongers offer up their takes.

Jun Lee and Evan Black were the first to talk; they had been part of the group that had found Loong's body. They were enjoying their moment in the spotlight as they told everyone who would listen about how they found Loong, and how he had been attacked, and how whatever had attacked him had eaten part of him. Some people speculated that a pack of yotes, the local carnivores, had cornered Joe Loong and brought him down, but Jun and Evan laughed at that. We'd all seen the yotes; they were the size of small dogs and ran from the colonists whenever they saw them (and for good reason, since the colonists had taken to shooting at them for bothering the livestock). No yote, or even a pack of yotes, they said, could have done to Joe what they'd seen had been done to him.

Shortly after these gory tidbits had gotten around, the entire colony council met in Croatoan's medical bay, where Loong's body had been taken. The fact that the *government* was being pulled into it made people suspect it might actually have been murder (the fact that the "government" in this case was just twelve people who spent most of their time hoeing rows like everyone else didn't matter). Loong had been seeing a woman who'd recently dumped her husband, so now the husband was a prime suspect; maybe he'd followed Loong into the woods, killed him, and then yotes had at him.

This theory made Jun and Evan unhappy—their version with a mysterious predator was much more sexy—but everyone else seemed to like it better. The inconvenient fact that the presumed murderer in this case had already been in Jane's custody on a different charge and couldn't possibly have done the deed seemed to escape most people's notice.

Gretchen and I knew the murder rumor had nothing to it, and that Jun and Evan's theory was closer to reality than not, but we kept our mouths shut. Adding what we knew wouldn't make anyone feel less paranoid at the moment.

"*I* know what it is," Magdy said, to a bunch of male friends.

I nudged Gretchen with an elbow and motioned with my head at Magdy. She rolled her eyes and very loudly called him over before he could say anything else.

"Yes?" he said.

"Are you stupid?" Gretchen asked.

"See, this is what I miss about you, Gretchen," Magdy said. "Your charm."

"Just like what I miss about you is your brains," Gretchen said. "What were you about to say to your little group of friends, I wonder?"

"I was going to tell them about what happened when we followed the fanties," Magdy said.

"Because you think it would be *smart* at the moment to give people another reason to panic," Gretchen said.

"No one's panicking," Magdy said.

"Not yet," I said. "But if you start telling that story, you're not going to *help* things, Magdy."

"I think people should know what we're up against," Magdy said.

"We don't know what we're up against," I said. "We never actually *saw* anything. You're just going to be adding to the rumors. Let my parents and Gretchen's dad and the rest of the council do their jobs right now and figure out what's actually going on and what to tell people without you making their job harder."

"I'll take that under advisement, Zoë," Magdy said, and turned to go back to his pals.

"Fine," Gretchen said. "Take this under advisement, too: You tell your pals there about what followed us out there in the woods, and I'll tell them the part where you ended up eating dirt because Hickory dropped you to the ground after you panicked and took a shot at him."

"A really lousy shot," I said. "One where you almost blew off your own toe."

"Good point," Gretchen said. "We'll have *fun* telling that part."

Magdy narrowed his eyes at both of us and stomped off toward his pals without another word.

"Think it'll work?" I asked.

"Of course it'll work," Gretchen said. "Magdy's ego is the size of a planet. The amount of time and effort he puts into doing things to make himself look good is astounding. He's not going to let us mess with that."

As if on cue, Magdy glanced over at Gretchen. She waved and smiled. Magdy surreptitiously flipped her off and started talking to his friends. "See," Gretchen said. "He's not that hard to understand."

"You liked him once," I reminded her.

"I still like him," Gretchen said. "He's *very* cute, you know. And funny. He just needs to pull his head out of a certain part of his anatomy. Maybe in another year he'll be tolerable."

"Or two," I said.

"I'm optimistic," Gretchen said. "Anyway, that's one rumor squashed for now."

"It's not really a rumor," I said. "We really were followed that night. Hickory said so."

"I know," Gretchen said. "And it's going to come out sooner or later. I'd just rather not have it involve *us*. My dad still doesn't know I did all that sneaking out, and he's the sort of guy that believes in retroactive punishment."

"So you're not really worried about avoiding panic," I said. "You're just covering your own tail."

"Guilty," Gretchen said. "But avoiding panic is how I'm rationalizing it."

But as it happens, we didn't avoid panic for long.

Paulo Gutierrez was a member of the colonial council, and it was there he found out that Joe Loong had not only been killed, but that he'd been murdered—and not by a human being. There really was something else out there. Something smart enough to make spears and knives. Something smart enough to turn poor Joe Loong into food.

The council members had been ordered by my parents not to talk about this fact yet, in order to avoid a panic. Paulo Gutierrez ignored them. Or, actually, defied them.

“They told me it was covered by something called the State Secrets Act, and that I couldn’t tell you about it,” Gutierrez told a group that surrounded him and a few other men, all carrying rifles. “I say to hell with that. There’s something that’s out there right now, killing us. They have weapons. They say they follow the fantie herds, but I think they could have just been in the woods all this time, sizing us up, so they would know how to hunt us. They hunted Joe Loong. Hunted him and killed him. Me and the boys here are planning to return the favor.” And then Gutierrez and his hunting party tromped off in the direction of the woods.

Gutierrez’s declaration and news of his hunting party raced through the colony. I heard about it as kids came running up to the community center with all the latest; by that time Gutierrez and his crew had already been in the woods for a while. I went to tell my parents, but John and Jane were already off to bring back the hunting party. The two of them were former military; I didn’t think they would have any trouble bringing them back.

But I was wrong. John and Jane found the hunting party, but before they could drag them back, the creatures in the woods ambushed them all. Gutierrez and all his men were killed in the attack. Jane was stabbed in the gut. John chased after the fleeing creatures and caught up with them at the tree line, where they attacked another colonist at his homestead. That colonist was Hiram Yoder, one of the Mennonites who helped save the colony by training the rest of us how to plant and farm without the help of computerized machinery. He was a pacifist and didn’t try to fight the creatures. They killed him anyway.

In the space of a couple of hours, six colonists were dead, and we learned that we weren’t alone on Roanoke—and what was here with us was getting used to hunting us.

But I was more worried about my mom.

“You can’t see her yet,” Dad said to me. “Dr. Tsao is working on her right now.”

“Is she going to be okay?” I asked.

“She’ll be okay,” Dad said. “She said it was not as bad as it looked.”

“How bad did it look?” I asked him.

"It looked bad," Dad said, and then realized that honesty wasn't really what I was looking for at the moment. "But, look, she ran after those things after she'd been wounded. If she had been really injured, she wouldn't have been able to do that, right? Your mom knows her own body. I think she'll be fine. And anyway, she's being worked on right now. I wouldn't be at all surprised if she's walking around like nothing happened by this time tomorrow."

"You don't have to lie to me," I said, although per the previous comment he was actually telling me what I wanted to hear.

"I'm not lying," Dad said. "Dr. Tsao is excellent at what she does. And your mom is a very fast healer these days."

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I've had better days," he said, and something flat and tired in his voice made me decide not to press the matter any further. I gave him a hug and told him I was going to visit Gretchen and would be over there for a while, in order to stay out of his hair.

Night was falling as I stepped out of our bungalow. I looked out toward Croatoan's gate and saw colonists streaming in from their homesteads; no one, it seemed, wanted to spend the night outside the walls of the colony village. I didn't blame them one bit.

I turned to head to Gretchen's and was mildly surprised to see her striding up under full steam. "We have a problem," she said to me.

"What is it?" I said.

"Our idiot friend Magdy has taken a group of his friends into the forest," Gretchen said.

"Oh, God," I said. "Tell me Enzo isn't with him."

"Of course Enzo's with him," Gretchen said. "Enzo's always with him. Trying to talk sense to him even as he's following him right off a cliff."

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SEVENTEEN

The four of us moved as silently as we could into the forest, from the place where Gretchen had seen Magdy, Enzo and their two friends go into the tree line. We listened for their sounds; none of them had been trained to move quietly. It wasn't a good thing for them, especially if the creatures decided to hunt them. It was better for us, because we wanted to track them. We listened for our friends on the ground, we watched and listened for movement in the trees. We already knew whatever they were could track us. We hoped we might be able to track them, too.

In the distance, we heard rustling, as if of quick, hurried movement. We headed that direction, Gretchen and I taking point, Hickory and Dickory fast behind.

Gretchen and I had been training for months, learning how to move, how to defend ourselves, how to fight and how to kill, if it was necessary. Tonight, any part of what we learned might have to be used. We might have to fight. We might even have to kill.

I was so scared that if I stopped running, I think I would have collapsed into a ball and never gotten up.

I didn't stop running. I kept going. Trying to find Enzo and Magdy before something else did. Trying to find them, and to save them.

"After Gutierrez left, Magdy didn't see any point in keeping our story quiet anymore, so he started blabbing to his friends," Gretchen had told me. "He was giving people the idea that he'd actually faced these

things and had managed to keep them off while the rest of us were getting away."

"Idiot," I said.

"When you parents came back without the hunting party, a group of his friends came to him about organizing a search," Gretchen said. "Which was actually just an excuse for a bunch of them to stalk through the forest with guns. My dad caught wind of this and tried to step on its head. He reminded them that five adults just went into the forest and didn't come out. I thought that was the end of it, but now I hear that Magdy just waited until my dad went to go visit yours before gathering up some like-minded idiots to head off into the woods."

"Didn't anyone notice them heading off?" I asked.

"They told people they were going to do a little target practice on Magdy's parents' homestead," Gretchen said. "No one's going to complain about them doing that right about now. Once they got there they just took off. The rest of Magdy's family is here in town like everyone else. No one knows they're missing."

"How'd you find out about this?" I asked. "It's not like Magdy would tell you this right now."

"His little group left someone behind," Gretchen said. "Isaiah Miller was going to go with him, but his dad wouldn't let him have the rifle for 'target practice.' I heard him complaining about that and then basically intimidated the rest of it out of him."

"Has he told anybody else?" I asked.

"I don't think so," Gretchen said. "Now that he's had time to think about it I don't think he wants to get in trouble. But *we* should tell someone."

"We'll cause a panic if we do," I said. "Six people have already died. If we tell people four more people—four kids—have gone off into the woods, people will go insane. Then we'll have more people heading off with guns and more people dying, either by these things or by accidentally shooting each other because they're so wired up."

"What do you want to do, then?" Gretchen asked.

"We've been training for this, Gretchen," I said.

Gretchen's eyes got very wide. "Oh, no," she said. "Zoë, I love you, but that's loopy. There's no way you're getting me out there to be a

target for these things again, and there's no way I'm going to let *you* go out there."

"It wouldn't just be us," I said. "Hickory and Dickory—"

"Hickory and Dickory are going to tell you you're nuts, too," Gretchen said. "They just spent months teaching you how to defend yourself, and you think they're going to be at all happy with you putting yourself out there for something to use as spear practice. I don't think so."

"Let's ask them," I said.

"Miss Gretchen is correct," Hickory said to me, once I called for it and Dickory. "This is a very bad idea. Major Perry and Lieutenant Sagan are the ones who should deal with this matter."

"My dad's got the whole rest of the colony to worry about at the moment," I said. "And Mom's in the medical bay, getting fixed from when she dealt with this the last time."

"You don't think that tells you something?" Gretchen said. I turned on her, a little angry, and she held up a hand. "Sorry, Zoë. That came out wrong. But think about it. Your mom was a Special Forces soldier. She fought things for a living. And if she came out of this with a wound bad enough for her to spend her night in the medical bay, it means that whatever is out there is serious business."

"Who else can do this?" I asked. "Mom and Dad went after that hunting party on their own for a reason—they had been trained to fight and deal with experiences like that. Anyone else would have gotten themselves killed. They can't go after Magdy and Enzo right now. If anyone else goes after them, they're going to be in just as much danger as those two and their other friends. We're the only ones who can do this."

"Don't get angry at me for saying this," Gretchen said. "But it sounds like you're *excited* to do this. Like you want to go out there and fight something."

"I want to find Enzo and Magdy," I said. "That's all I want to do."

"We should inform your father," Hickory said.

"If we inform my father he'll tell us no," I said. "And the longer we talk about this the longer it's going to take to find our friends."

Hickory and Dickory put their heads together and clacked quietly for a minute. “This is not a good idea,” Hickory said, finally. “But we will help you.”

“Gretchen?” I asked.

“I’m trying to decide if Magdy is worth it,” she said.

“Gretchen,” I said.

“It’s a joke,” she said. “The sort you make when you’re about to wet your pants.”

“If we are to do this,” Hickory said. “We must do it on the assumption that we will engage in combat. You have been trained with firearms and hand weapons. You must be prepared to use them if necessary.”

“I understand,” I said. Gretchen nodded.

“Then let us get ready,” Hickory said. “And let us do so quietly.”

Any confidence that I had any idea what I was doing left me the moment we entered the forest, when the running through the trees brought me back to the last time I raced through them at night, some unknown thing or things pacing us invisibly. The difference between now and then was that I had been trained and prepared to fight. I thought it would make a difference in how I felt.

It didn’t. I was scared. And not just a little.

The rustling, rushing sound we had heard was getting closer to us and heading right for us, on the ground and moving fast. The four of us halted and hid and prepared ourselves to deal with whatever was coming at us.

Two human forms burst out of the brush and ran in a straight line past where Gretchen and I were hiding. Hickory and Dickory grabbed them as they passed by them; the boys screamed in terror as Hickory and Dickory took them down. Their rifles went skidding across the ground.

Gretchen and I rushed over to them and tried to calm them down. Being human helped.

Neither was Enzo or Magdy.

"Hey," I said, as soothingly as I could, to the one closest to me. "Hey. Relax. You're safe. Relax." Gretchen was doing the same to the other one. Eventually I recognized who they were: Albert Yoo and Michel Gruber. Both Albert and Michel were people I had long filed away under the "kind of a twit" category, so I didn't spend any more time with them than I had to. They had returned the favor.

"Albert," I said, to the one closest to me. "Where are Enzo and Magdy?"

"Get your thing off of me!" Albert said. Dickory was still restraining him.

"Dickory," I said. It let Albert go. "Where are Enzo and Magdy?" I repeated.

"I don't know," Albert said. "We got separated. Those things in the trees started chanting at us and Michel and I got spooked and took off."

"Chanting?" I asked.

"Or singing or clicking or whatever," Albert said. "We were walking along, looking for these things when all these noises started coming out of the trees. Like they were trying to show us that they had snuck up on us without us even knowing."

This worried me. "Hickory?" I asked.

"There is nothing significant in the trees," it said. I relaxed a little.

"They surrounded us," Albert said. "And then Magdy took a shot at them. And then things really got loud. Michel and I got out of there. We just ran. We didn't see where Magdy and Enzo went."

"How long ago was this?" I asked.

"I don't know," Albert said. "Ten minutes, fifteen. Something like that."

"Show us where you came from," I said. Albert pointed. I nodded. "Get up," I said. "Dickory will take you and Michel back to the tree line. You can get back from there."

"I'm not going anywhere with that *thing,*" Michel said, his first contribution to the evening.

"Okay, then you have two choices," I said. "Stay here and hope we come back for you before these things do, or hope that you make it to the tree line before they catch up with you. Or you can let Dickory help you and maybe *survive.* Your choice." I said it a little more

forcefully than I had to, but I was annoyed that this idiot didn't want help staying alive.

"Okay," he said.

"Good," I said. I picked up their rifles and handed them to Dickory, and took his. "Take them to the tree line near Magdy's homestead. Don't give them back their rifles until you get there. Come back and find us as soon as you can." Dickory nodded, intimidated Albert and Michel into movement, and headed off.

"I never liked them," Gretchen said as they left.

"I can see why," I said, and gave Dickory's rifle to Hickory. "Come on. Let's keep going."

We heard them before we saw them. Actually, Hickory, whose hearing goes above human range, heard them—trilling and chirping and chanting. "They *are* singing," Hickory said quietly, and led Gretchen and me to them. Dickory arrived, silently, just before we found them. Hickory handed over its rifle.

In the small clearing were six figures.

Enzo and Magdy were the first I recognized. They knelt on the ground, heads down, waiting for whatever was going to happen to them. The light was not good enough for me to see any expression on either of their faces, but I didn't have to see their faces to know that they were scared. Whatever had happened to the two of them had gone badly, and now they were just waiting for it to end. However it would end.

I took in Enzo's kneeling form and remembered in a rush why I loved him. He was there because he was trying to be a good friend for Magdy. Trying to keep him out of trouble, or at the very least to share his trouble if he could. He was a *decent* human being, which is rare enough but is something of a miracle in a teenage boy. I came out here for him because I still loved him. It had been weeks since we'd said anything more than a simple "hello" at school—when you break up in a small community you have to make some space—but it didn't matter. I was still connected to him. Some part of him stayed in my heart, and I imagined would for as long as I lived.

Yes, it was a really *inconvenient* place and time to realize all of this, but these things happen when they happen. And it didn't make any noise, so it was all right.

I looked over at Magdy, and this is the thought I had: *When all of this is through, I am seriously going to kick his ass.*

The four other figures . . .

Werewolves.

It was the only way to describe them. They looked feral, and strong, and carnivorous and nightmarish, and with all of that was movement and sound that made it clear that there were brains in there to go along with everything else. They shared the four eyes of all the Roanoke animals we had seen so far, but other than that they could have been lifted right out of folklore. These were werewolves.

Three of the werewolves were busy taunting and poking Magdy and Enzo, clearly toying with them and threatening them. One of them held a rifle that it had taken off of Magdy, and was jabbing him with it. I wondered if was still loaded, and what would happen to Magdy or the werewolf if it went off. Another held a spear and occasionally poked Enzo with it. The three of them were chirping and clicking at each other; I don't doubt they were discussing what to do with Magdy and Enzo, and how to do it.

The fourth werewolf stood apart from the other three and acted differently. When one of the other werewolves went to poke Enzo or Magdy, it would step in and try to keep them from doing it, standing between the humans and the rest of the werewolves. Occasionally it would step in and try to talk to one of the other werewolves, gesturing back to Enzo and Magdy for emphasis. It was trying to convince the other werewolves of something. To let the humans go? Maybe. Whatever it was, the other werewolves weren't having any of it. The fourth werewolf kept at it anyway.

It suddenly reminded me of Enzo, the first time I saw him, trying to keep Magdy from getting into an idiotic fight for no reason at all. It didn't work that time; Gretchen and I had to step in and do something. It wasn't working now, either.

I glanced over and saw that Hickory and Dickory had both taken up positions where they could get clean shots at the werewolves.

Gretchen had moved off from me and was setting up her own shot.

Between the four of us we could take all of the werewolves before they even knew what had happened to them. It would be quick and clean and easy, and we'd get Enzo and Magdy out of there and back home before anyone knew anything had happened.

It was the smart thing to do. I quietly moved and readied my weapon, and took a minute or two to stop shaking and steady up.

I knew we'd take them in sequence, Hickory on the far left taking the first of the three group werewolves, Dickory taking the second, Gretchen the third, and I the last one, standing away from the rest. I knew the rest of them were waiting for me to make the shot.

One of the werewolves moved to poke Enzo again. My werewolf hurried, too late, to stop the assault.

And I knew. I didn't want to. I just didn't. Didn't want to kill it. Because it was trying to save my friends, not kill them. It didn't deserve to die just because that was the easiest way to get back Enzo and Magdy.

But I didn't know what else to do.

The three werewolves started chittering again, first in what seemed like a random way, but then together, and to a beat. The one with a spear began thumping it into the ground in time, and the three of them started working off the beat, playing against each other's voices for what was clearly a victory chant of some sort or another. The fourth werewolf started gesturing more frantically. I had a terrible fear of what was going to happen at the end of the chant.

They kept singing, getting closer to the end of that chant.

So I did what I had to do.

I sang back.

I opened my mouth and the first line of "Delhi Morning" came out of it. Not well, and not on key. Actually, it was really bad—all those months of practicing it and playing it at hootenannies were not paying off. It didn't matter. It was doing what I needed it to do. The werewolves immediately fell silent. I kept singing.

I glanced over to Gretchen, who was not so far away that I couldn't read the *Are you completely insane?* look that she had on her face. I gave her a look that said, *Help me out please*. Her face tightened up into

something unreadable and she sighted down her rifle to keep one of the werewolves squarely in target—and started to sing the counterpoint of the song, dipping above and below my part, like we had practiced so many times. With her help I found the right key to sing and homed in.

And now the werewolves knew there was more than one of us.

To the left of Gretchen, Dickory chimed in, mimicking the sitar of the song as he did so well. It was funny to watch, but when you closed your eyes it was hard to tell the difference between it and the real thing. I drank in the twang of his voice and kept singing. And to the left of Dickory, Hickory finally came in, using its long neck to sound off like a drum, finding the beat and keeping it from then on.

And now the werewolves knew there were as many of us as them. And that we could have killed them anytime. But we didn't.

My stupid plan was working. Now all I had to do was figure what I had planned to do next. Because I really didn't know what I was doing here. All I knew was that I didn't want to shoot my werewolf. The one, in fact, who had now stepped off entirely away from the rest of his pack and was walking toward where he thought my voice was coming from.

I decided to meet him halfway. I set down my rifle and stepped into the clearing, still singing.

The werewolf with the spear began to raise it, and suddenly my mouth was very dry. I think my werewolf noticed something on my face, because it turned and chattered madly at the spear carrier. The spear went down; my werewolf didn't know it, but he'd just saved his friend a bullet in the head from Gretchen.

My werewolf turned back to me and started walking toward me again. I kept singing until the song was through. By that time, my werewolf was standing right next to me.

Our song was finished. I stood there, waiting to see what my werewolf would do next.

What he did next was point to my neck, to the jade elephant pendant Jane had given me.

I touched it. "Elephant," I said. "Like your fanties."

He stared at it again and then stared at me again. Finally it chirped out something.

"Hello," I said back. What else was I going to say?

We had a couple more minutes of sizing each other up. Then one of the three other werewolves chirped something. He chirped something back, and then tilted his head at me, as if to say, *It would really help me if you actually did something here*.

So I pointed to Enzo and Magdy. "Those two belong to me," I said, making what I hoped were appropriate hand signals, so my werewolf would get the idea. "I want to take them back with me." I motioned back in the direction of the colony. "Then we'll leave you alone."

The werewolf watched all my hand signals; I'm not sure how many of them he actually got. But when I was done, he pointed to Enzo and Magdy, then to me, and then in the direction of the colony, as if to say, *Let me make sure I've got this right*.

I nodded, said "yes," and then repeated all the hand signals again. We were actually having a conversation.

Or maybe we weren't, because what followed was an explosion of chittering from my werewolf, along with some wild gesticulating. I tried to follow it but I had no idea what was going on. I looked at him helplessly, trying to get what he was saying.

Finally he figured out I had no clue what he was doing. So he pointed at Magdy, and then pointed at the rifle one of the other werewolves was holding. And then he pointed at his side, and then motioned at me as if to take a closer look. Against my better judgment, I did, and noticed something I missed before: My werewolf was injured. An ugly furrow was carved into his side, surrounded by raw welts on either side.

That idiot Magdy had shot my werewolf.

Barely, sure. Magdy was lucky that his aim continued to be bad, otherwise he'd probably already be dead. But even grazing it was bad enough.

I backed up from the werewolf and let him know I'd seen enough. He pointed at Enzo, pointed at me, and pointed back to the colony. Then he pointed at Magdy and pointed at his werewolf friends. This was clear enough: He was saying Enzo was free to go with me, but his friends wanted to keep Magdy. I didn't doubt that would end badly for Magdy.

I shook my head and made it clear I needed the both of them. My werewolf made it equally clear they wanted Magdy. Our negotiations had just hit a really big snag.

I looked my werewolf up and down. He was stocky, barely taller than me, and covered only in a sort of short skirt cinched up with a belt. A simple stone knife hung from the belt. I'd seen pictures of knives like it from history books detailing the Cro-Magnon days back on Earth. The funny thing about the Cro-Magnons was that despite the fact that they were barely above banging rocks together, their brains were actually larger than our brains are now. They were cavemen, but they weren't stupid. They had the ability to think about serious stuff.

"I sure hope you have a Cro-Magnon brain," I said to my werewolf. "Otherwise I'm about to get in trouble."

He tilted his head again, trying to figure out what I was trying to say to him.

I motioned again, trying to make it clear I wanted to talk to Magdy. My werewolf didn't seem happy about this, and chattered something to his friends. They chattered back, and got pretty agitated. But in the end, my werewolf reached out to me. I let him take my wrist and he dragged me over to Magdy. His three friends fanned themselves out behind me, ready if I should try anything stupid. I knew outside the clearing Hickory and Dickory, at least, would be moving to get better sight lines. There were still lots of ways this could go very very wrong.

Magdy was still kneeling, not looking at me or anything else but a spot on the ground.

"Magdy," I said.

"Kill these stupid things and get us out of here already," he said, quietly and fast, still not looking at me. "I know you know how. I know you have enough people out there to do it."

"Magdy," I said again. "Listen to me carefully and don't interrupt me. These things want to kill you. They're willing to let Enzo go, but they want to keep you because you shot one of them. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

"Just kill them," Magdy said.

"No," I said. "*You* went after these guys, Magdy. *You* were hunting them. *You* shot at them. I'm going to try to keep you from getting

killed. But I'm not going to kill them because you put yourself in their way. Not unless I have to. Do you understand me?"

"They're going to kill us," Magdy said. "You and me and Enzo."

"I don't think so," I said. "But if you don't shut up and actually listen to what I'm trying to say to you, you're going to make that more likely."

"Just shoot—" Magdy began.

"For God's sake, Magdy," Enzo said suddenly, from Magdy's side. "One person on the entire planet is risking her own neck for you and all you can do is *argue* with her. You really are an ungrateful piece of crap. Now would you please *shut up* and *listen* to her. I'd like to get out of this alive."

I don't know who was more surprised by that outburst, me or Magdy.

"Fine," Magdy said, after a minute.

"These things want to kill you because you shot one of them," I said. "I'm going to try to convince them to let you go. But you're going to have to trust me and follow my lead and not argue and *not fight back.* For the last time: Do you understand me?"

"Yes," Magdy said.

"Okay," I said. "They think I'm your leader. So I need to give them the idea I'm angry with you for what you did. I'm going to have to punish you in front of them. And just so you know, this is going to hurt. A *lot.*"

"Just—" Magdy began.

"Magdy," I said.

"Yeah, all right, whatever," Magdy said. "Let's just do this."

"Okay," I said. "Sorry about this." Then I kicked him in the ribs. Hard.

He collapsed with a *whoosh* and fell flat to the ground. Whatever he was expecting, he wasn't expecting that.

After he had gasped on the ground for a minute I grabbed him by the hair. He clutched at my hand and tried to get away.

"Don't *fight* me," I said, and gave him a quick punch in the ribs to make the point. He got it and stopped. I pulled his head back and yelled at him for shooting the werewolf, pointing at his rifle and then

the wounded werewolf and back and forth several times to make the point. The werewolves seemed to make the connection and chittered among themselves about it.

"Apologize," I told Magdy, still holding his head.

Magdy reached out to the wounded werewolf. "I'm sorry," he said. "If I had known that shooting would mean Zoë got to beat the crap out of me, I would never have done it."

"Thanks," I said, and then let go of his hair and smacked him hard across the face. Magdy went down again. I looked over to the werewolf to see if this was sufficient. He didn't look like he was quite there yet.

I loomed over Magdy. "How are you doing?" I asked.

"I think I'm going to throw up," he said.

"Good," I said. "I think that would work. Need any help?"

"I got it," he said, and retched all over the ground. This got impressed chirps from the werewolves.

"Okay," I said. "Last part, Magdy. You *really* have to trust me on this one."

"Please stop hurting me now," Magdy said.

"Almost done," I said. "Stand up, please."

"I don't think I can," he said.

"Sure you can," I said, and wrenched his arm to give him motivation. Magdy inhaled and stood up. I marched him over to my werewolf, who eyed the both of us, curiously. I pointed at Magdy, and then to the werewolf's wound. Then I pointed to the werewolf, and made a slashing motion on Magdy's side, and then pointed at the werewolf's knife.

The werewolf gave me yet another head tilt, as if to say, *I want to be sure we understand each other, here*.

"Fair's fair," I said.

"You're going to let him *stab* me?" Magdy said, his voice rising dramatically at the end of that sentence.

"You shot him," I said.

"He could *kill* me," Magdy said.

"You could have killed him," I said.

"I hate you," Magdy said. "I really really really hate you now."

"Shut up," I said, and then nodded to the werewolf. "Trust me," I said to Magdy.

The werewolf drew his knife, and then looked back at his companions, who were all chattering loudly and beginning to chant what they were chanting earlier. I was all right with that. The difference now was that it was my werewolf who would do whatever violence would be done.

My werewolf stood there for a minute, soaking in the chant of his fellow werewolves. Then without warning he sliced at Magdy so quickly that I only got him moving back, not forward. Magdy hissed in pain. I let him go and he fell to the ground, clutching his side. I moved in front of him and grabbed his hands. "Let me see," I said. Magdy moved his hands and winced preemptively, expecting a gush of blood.

There was only the thinnest red line on his side. The werewolf had cut Magdy just enough to let him know he could have cut him a lot worse.

"I knew it," I said.

"You knew what?" Magdy said.

"That I was dealing with a Cro-Magnon," I said.

"I *really* don't understand you," Magdy said.

"Stay down," I said. "Don't get up until I tell you."

"I'm not moving," he said. "Really."

I stood up and faced the werewolf, who had put his knife back on his belt. He pointed to Magdy, and then pointed to me, and then pointed back toward the colony.

"Thank you," I said, and gave the werewolf a little nod of my head, which I hoped would convey the idea. When I looked up again, I saw him staring at my jade elephant again. I wondered if he'd ever seen jewelry before, or if it was simply because an elephant looks like a fantie. These werewolves followed the fantie herds; they would be a main source of food for them. They were their lives.

I took off my necklace and handed it to my werewolf. He took it and gently touched the pendant, making it twirl and glitter in the dim light of the night. He cooed at it appreciatively. Then he handed it back to me.

"No," I said. I held up a hand, and then pointed to the pendant, and to him. "It's for you. I'm giving it to you." The werewolf stood there for a moment, and then uttered a trill, which caused his friends to crowd around him. He held up the pendant for them to admire.

"Here," I said, after a minute, and motioned to him to hand me the necklace. He did, and I—*very* slowly, so I wouldn't surprise him—put it around his neck and fastened it. The pendant touched his chest. He touched it again.

"There," I said. "That was given to me by someone very important, so I would remember the people who loved me. I'm giving it to you, so you'll remember that I'm thanking you for giving me back people I love. Thank you."

The werewolf gave me another of his head tilts.

"I know you don't have any idea what I'm saying," I said. "Thank you anyway."

The werewolf reached to his side, pulled his knife. Then he laid it flat on his hand and offered it to me.

I took it. "Wow," I said, and admired it. I was careful not to touch the actual blade; I'd already seen how sharp it was. I tried to return it but he held up his hand or claw or whatever you want to call it, in a mirror of what I did for him. He was giving it to me.

"Thank you," I said again. He chirped, and with that he returned to his friends. The one holding Magdy's rifle dropped it, and then without looking back they walked to the nearest trees, scaled them at an unbelievable speed and were gone almost instantly.

"Holy crap," I said, after a minute. "I can't believe that actually *worked.*"

"*You* can't believe it," Gretchen said. She came out of hiding and stalked right up to me. "What the hell is wrong with you? We come out all this way and you *sing* at them. *Sing.* Like you're at a hootenanny. We are not doing this again. Ever."

"Thank you for following my lead," I said. "And for trusting me. I love you."

"I love you too," Gretchen said. "It still doesn't mean this is *ever* going to happen again."

"Fair enough," I said.

"It was almost worth it to see you beat the crap out of Magdy, though," Gretchen said.

"God, I feel horrible about that," I said.

"Really?" Gretchen said. "It wasn't just a little bit of fun?"

"Oh, all right," I said. "Maybe a little."

"I'm right *here,*" Magdy said, from the ground.

"And you need to thank Zoë you are," Gretchen said, and bent down to kiss him. "You stupid, exasperating person. I am *so* happy you are still alive. And if you *ever* do anything like this again, I will kill you myself. And you know I can."

"I know," he said, and pointed to me. "And if you can't, she will. I get it."

"Good," Gretchen said. She stood up and then held out her hand to Magdy. "Now get up. We've got a long way to go to get home, and I think we just blew all our dumb luck for the year."

"What are you going to tell your parents?" Enzo asked me, as we walked home.

"Tonight? Not a thing," I said. "Both of them have enough to worry about tonight. They don't need me coming in and saying that while they were out I faced down four werewolves who were about to kill two more colonists, and defeated them using only the power of *song.* I think I might wait a day or two to drop *that* one. That's a hint, by the way."

"Hint taken," Enzo said. "Although you are going to tell them something."

"Yes," I said. "We have to. If these werewolves are following the fantie herds then we're going to have problems like this every year, and every time they come back. I think we need to let people know they're not actually murdering savages, but we're all still better off if we just leave them alone."

"How did you know?" Enzo asked me, a minute later.

"Know what?" I said.

"That those werewolf thingies weren't just murdering savages," Enzo said. "You held Magdy and let that werewolf take a shot at him.

You thought he wouldn't stab Magdy to death. I heard you, you know. After it did it, you said 'I knew it.' So how did you know?"

"I didn't," I said. "But I hoped. He had just spent God knows how long keeping his friends from killing the two of you. I don't think he was just doing it because he was a nice guy."

"Nice werewolf," Enzo said.

"Nice whatever he is," I said. "Thing is, the werewolves have killed some of us. I know John and Jane killed some of them trying to get our people back. Both of us—the colonists and the werewolves—showed we were perfectly able to kill each other. I think we needed to show that we were capable of *not* killing each other, too. We let them know that when we sang at them instead of shooting them. I think my werewolf got that. So when I offered him a chance to get back at Magdy, I guessed he wouldn't really hurt him. Because I think he wanted us to know he was smart enough to know what would happen if he did."

"You still took a big risk," Enzo said.

"Yeah, I did," I said. "But the only other alternative was to kill him and his friends, or have them kill all of us. Or all of us kill each other. I guess I hoped I could do something better. Besides, I didn't think it was too big a risk. What he was doing when he was keeping the others away from you two reminded me of someone I knew."

"Who?" Enzo asked.

"You," I said.

"Yes, well," Enzo said. "I think tonight marks the official last time I tag along with Magdy to keep him out of trouble. After this he's on his own."

"I have nothing bad to say about this idea," I said.

"I didn't think you would," Enzo said. "I know Magdy gets on your last nerve sometimes."

"He does," I said. "He really, really does. But what can I do? He's my friend."

"He belongs to you," Enzo said. "And so do I."

I looked over at him. "You heard that part, too," I said.

"Trust me, Zoë," Enzo said. "Once you showed up, I never stopped listening to you. I'll be able to recite everything you said for the rest of

my life. Which I now have, thanks to you."

"And Gretchen and Hickory and Dickory," I said.

"And I will thank them all, too," Enzo said. "But right now I want to focus on you. Thank you, Zoë Boutin-Perry. Thank you for saving my life."

"You're welcome," I said. "And stop it. You're making me blush."

"I don't believe it," Enzo said. "And now it's too dark to see."

"Feel my cheeks," I said.

He did. "You don't feel especially blushy," he said.

"You're not doing it right," I said.

"I'm out of practice," he said.

"Well, fix that," I said.

"All right," Enzo said, and kissed me.

"That was supposed to make you blush, not cry," he said, after we stopped.

"Sorry," I said, and tried to get myself back together. "I've just really missed it. That. Us."

"It's my fault," Enzo started.

I put a hand up to his lips. "I don't care about any of that," I said. "I really don't, Enzo. None of that matters to me. I just don't want to miss you anymore."

"Zoë," Enzo said. He took my hands. "You saved me. You have me. You *own* me. I belong to you. You said it yourself."

"I did," I admitted.

"So that's settled," Enzo said.

"Okay," I said, and smiled.

We kissed some more, in the night, outside Enzo's front gate.

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EIGHTEEN

The conversation Hickory was having with Dad about the Conclave and the Colonial Union was really interesting, right up until the point where Hickory said it and Dickory were planning to kill my parents. Then, well. I sort of lost it.

To be fair, it had been a really *long* day.

I had said good night to Enzo, dragged my butt home, and could barely think straight enough to hide the stone knife in my dresser and fend off Babar's lick attack on my face before I collapsed onto my cot and passed out without even bothering to get all the way undressed. At some point after I lay down, Jane came home from the medical bay, kissed me on the forehead and slipped off my boots, but I barely remember that other than murmuring something to her about how happy I was she was better. At least, that's what I was saying inside my head; I don't know if my mouth formed the actual words. I think it did. I was very tired at the time.

Not too much after that, though, Dad came in and gently nudged me awake. "Come on, hon," he said. "I need you to do something for me."

"I'll do it in the morning," I mumbled. "I *swear.*"

"No, sweetheart," he said. "I need you to do it now." The tone of his voice, gentle but insistent, told me he really did need me to get up. I did, but with enough grumbling to maintain my honor. We went to the living room of our bungalow; Dad steered me to the couch, which I sat on and tried to maintain a semiconscious state that would allow me to

go back to sleep when we were done with whatever it was we were doing. Dad sat down at his desk; Mom stood next to him. I smiled sleepily at her but she seemed not to notice. Between me and my parents were Hickory and Dickory.

Dad spoke to Hickory. "Can you two lie?" he asked it.

"We have not yet lied to you," Hickory said. Which even in my sleepy state I recognized as not being an actual answer to the question that was asked. Dad and Hickory bantered back and forth a little about what being able to lie brings to a conversation (in my opinion, mostly the ability to not have to argue about stupid things it's just better to lie about, but no one asked me), and then Dad asked me to tell Hickory and Dickory to answer all his questions without any lies or evasions.

This finally woke me all the way up. "Why?" I asked. "What's going on?"

"Please do it," Dad said.

"All right," I said, and then turned to Hickory. "Hickory, please answer my dad without lying to him or evading his questions. All right?"

"As you wish, Zoë," Hickory said.

"Dickory too," I said.

"We will both answer truthfully," Hickory said.

"Thank you," Dad said, and then turned back to me. "You can go back to bed now, sweetie."

This annoyed me. I was a human being, not a truth serum. "I want to know what's going on," I said.

"It's not something you need to worry about," Dad said.

"You order me to have these two tell you the truth, and you want me to believe it's not something I need to worry about?" I asked. The sleep toxins were taking their time leaving my system, because even as I was saying this I realized it came out showing a little more attitude to my parents than was entirely warranted at the moment.

As if to confirm this, Jane straightened herself up a bit. "Zoë," she said.

I recalibrated. "Besides, if I leave there's no guarantee they won't lie to you," I said, trying to sound a bit more reasonable. "They're emotionally equipped to lie to you, because they don't care about

disappointing you. But they don't want to disappoint *me.*" I didn't know if this was actually true or not. But I was guessing it was.

Dad turned to Hickory. "Is this true?"

"We would lie to you if we felt it was necessary," Hickory said. "We would not lie to Zoë."

There was a really interesting question here of whether Hickory was saying this because it was actually true, or whether it was saying it in order to back me up on what I said, and if the latter, what the actual truth value of the statement was. If I were more awake, I think I would have thought about it more at the time. But as it was, I just nodded and said, "There you go," to my dad.

"Breathe a word of this to anyone and you're spending the next year in the horse stall," Dad said.

"My lips are sealed," I said, and almost made a lip-locking motion, but thought better of it at the last second.

And a good thing, too, because suddenly Jane came up and loomed over me, bearing her *I am as serious as death* expression. "No," she said. "I need you to understand that what you're hearing here you absolutely cannot share with anyone else. Not Gretchen. Not any of your other friends. Not anyone. It's not a game and it's not a fun secret. This is dead serious business, Zoë. If you're not ready to accept that, you need to leave this room right now. I'll take my chances with Hickory and Dickory lying to us, but not you. So do you understand that when we tell you not to share this with anyone, that you cannot share it with anyone else? Yes or no."

Several thoughts entered my mind at that moment.

The first is that it was times like this when I had the smallest inkling of how *terrifying* Jane must have been as a soldier. She was the best mom a girl could ever have, make no mistake about it, but when she got like this, she was as hard and cold and direct as any person could be. She was, to use a word, intimidating. And this was just with words. I tried to imagine her stalking across a battlefield with the same expression on her face she had now, and standard-issue Defense Forces rifle. I think I actually felt at least three of my internal organs contract at the thought.

The second is I wondered what she would think of my ability to keep a secret if she had known what I had just done with my evening.

The third was maybe she *did,* and that was what this was about.

I felt several other of my internal organs contract at *that* thought.

Jane was still looking at me, cold like stone, waiting for my answer.

"Yes," I said. "I understand, Jane. Not a word."

"Thank you, Zoë," Jane said. Then she bent down and kissed the top of my head. Just like that, she was my mom again. Which in its way made her even more terrifying, if you ask me.

That settled, Dad started asking Hickory about the Conclave and what it and Dickory knew about that group. Since we had made the jump to Roanoke, we had been waiting for the Conclave to find us, and when they found us, to destroy us, like they had destroyed the Whaid colony in the video the Colonial Union had given us. Dad wanted to know if what Hickory knew about the Conclave was different than what we knew.

Hickory said yes, basically. They knew quite a bit about the Conclave, based on the Obin government's own files on them—and that their own files, contrary to what we had been told by the Colonial Union, showed that when it came to colonies, the Conclave much preferred to evacuate the colonies they confronted, rather than destroying them.

Dad asked Hickory why, if they had different information, they had not shared it earlier. Hickory said because they had been ordered not to by their government; neither Hickory nor Dickory would have lied about having the information if Dad had asked them, but he had never asked them about it before. I think this struck Dad as a bit weaselly on the part of Hickory and Dickory, but he let it go.

Dad asked Hickory if it'd seen the video the Colonial Union had given us, of the Conclave destroying the Whaid colony. Hickory said that it and Dickory had their own version. Dad asked if their version was different; Hickory said it was—it was longer and showed General Gau, who had ordered the destruction of the Whaid colony, trying to convince the Whaidi colony leader to let the Conclave evacuate the colonists, only to have the Whaid refuse to leave before the destruction of their colony. Hickory said that other times, on other colony worlds,

colonists *did* ask to be evacuated, and the Conclave carried them off the planet, and sent them back to their homeworlds or allowed them to join the Conclave as citizens.

Jane asked for numbers. Hickory said they knew of seventeen colony removals by the Conclave. Ten of those had the Conclave returning colonists to their former homes. Four of those had the colonists joining the Conclave. Only three involved the destruction of the colonies, after the colonists refused to move. The Conclave was dead serious about not allowing anyone else to start new colonies, but—unlike what we were told by the Colonial Union—didn't insist on killing everyone on those new colonies to make the point.

This was fascinating stuff—and disturbing. Because if what Hickory was saying was true—and it was, because Hickory would not lie to me, or to my parents against my will—then it meant that either the Colonial Union had been wildly wrong about the Conclave, and its leader General Gau, or that the CU had lied to us when it told us what would happen if the Conclave found us. The first of these was certainly possible, I suppose; the Colonial Union was in a state of active hostility with almost every other alien race that we knew about, which I would guess would make intelligence gathering harder than it might be if we had more friends. But it was really more likely that the second of these was the truth: Our government lied to us.

But if the Colonial Union lied to us, why did it do it? What did it get from lying to us, punting us to who knows where in the universe, and making us live in fear of being discovered—and putting all of us in danger?

What was our own government up to?

And what would the Conclave really do to us if it found us?

This was such an interesting thing to think about that I almost missed the part where Hickory explained the reason why it and Dickory actually had detailed files about the Conclave's other colony removals: in order to convince Mom and Dad, should the Conclave come knocking, to surrender our colony rather than to let it be destroyed. And why would they want to convince Mom and Dad of this?

"Because of Zoë?" Dad asked Hickory.

"Yes," Hickory said.

"Wow," I said. This was news.

"Quiet, sweetheart," Dad said, and then gave his attention back to Hickory. "What would happen if Jane and I chose not to surrender the colony?" he asked.

"We would prefer not to say," Hickory said.

"Don't evade," Dad said. "Answer the question."

I caught Hickory giving me a quick look before it answered. "We would kill you and Lieutenant Sagan," Hickory said. "You and any other colony leader who would authorize the destruction of the colony."

Dad said something to this and Hickory said something back, but I missed most of it because my brain was trying to process what I had just heard, and it was absolutely and completely utterly failing. I knew I was important to the Obin. I had always known it abstractly, and then Hickory and Dickory had pounded the point into me months ago, when they had attacked me and showed me what it felt to be hunted, and showed me why I had to learn to defend myself. But in no formulation of my importance was even the conception that I was so important to the Obin that if it came to it, they would kill my parents to save me.

I didn't even know how to *think* about something like that. Didn't know how to *feel* about it. The idea kept trying to hook into my brain, and it just wasn't working. It was like having an out of body experience. I floated up over the conversation, and listened to Jane interject herself into the discussion, asking Hickory if even after admitting this as their plan, if it and Dickory would still kill her and John. Kill my mom and dad.

"If you choose to surrender the colony, yes," Hickory said.

I actually felt a *snap* as I reeled myself back into my head, and I'm happy to say that I quite suddenly knew exactly how to feel about all of this: absolutely enraged.

"Don't you *dare,*" I said, and I flung out the words. "Under no circumstances *will you do that.*" I was surprised to find myself standing when I said it; I didn't remember getting up. I was shaking so hard with anger I wasn't sure how I was still standing.

Hickory and Dickory both flinched at my anger, and trembled. "This one thing we must refuse you," Hickory said. "You are too important. To us. To all Obin."

To all Obin.

If I could have spat, I would.

Here it was again. All of my life, bounded by the Obin. Bounded not in *who* I was, but *what* I was. By what I *meant* to them. There was nothing about my own life that mattered in this, except what entertainment I could give them as billions of Obin played the records of my life like it was a funny show. If any other girl had been Charles Boutin's daughter, they would have happily watched her life instead. If any other girl's adopted parents had gotten in the way of the Obin's plan for her, they would have slaughtered them, too. Who I was meant nothing. The only thing that mattered was that I just happened to have been one man's daughter. A man who the Obin had thought could give them something. A man whose daughter's life they had bargained with to get that thing. A man who ended up *dying* because of the work he'd done for them. And now they wanted more sacrifices.

So I let Hickory and Dickory know how I felt. "I've already lost one parent because of the *Obin,*" I said, and loaded everything I could into that last word. All my anger and disgust and horror and rage, at the idea they should so casually decide to take from me two people who had only ever shown me love and affection and honor, and flick them aside like they were nothing more than an inconvenience.

I hated Hickory and Dickory that minute. Hated them in that way that comes only when someone you love takes that love and betrays it, completely and totally. Hated them because they would betray me because they believe they loved me.

I hated them.

"Everybody calm down," John said. "No one is killing anyone. All right? This is a nonissue. Zoë, Hickory and Dickory aren't going to kill us because we're not going to let the colony be destroyed. Simple as that. And there is no way I would let anything happen to you, Zoë. Hickory and Dickory and I *all* agree that you are too important for that."

I opened my mouth to say something to that and just started sobbing instead. I felt like I'd gone numb from the legs; suddenly Jane was there, holding me and leading me back to the couch. I sobbed on her like I did so many years ago outside that toy store, trying to sort out everything I was thinking.

I heard Dad make Hickory and Dickory swear to protect me, always, under all circumstances. They swore. I felt like I didn't want their help or protection ever again. I knew it would pass. Even now I knew it was because of the moment that I felt this way. It didn't change the fact that I still felt it. I was going to have to live with it from now on.

Dad talked with Hickory more about the Conclave and asked to see the Obin's files on the other colony removals. Hickory said they would need to go to the information center to do it. Even though it was now so late it was almost morning, Dad wanted to do it right then. He gave me a kiss and headed out the door with the Obin; Jane held back a second.

"Are you going to be okay?" she asked me.

"I'm having a really intense day, Mom," I said. "I think I want it to be over."

"I'm sorry you had to hear what Hickory said," Jane said. "I don't think there would have been any good way to handle it."

I sniffled out a small grin. "*You* seem to have taken it well," I said. "If someone was telling me they had plans to kill me, I don't think I would have taken it anywhere as calmly."

"Let's just say I wasn't entirely surprised to hear Hickory say that," Jane said. I looked up at her, surprised. "You're a treaty condition, remember," she said. "And you are the Obin's main experience of what it's like to live."

"They all live," I said.

"No," Jane said. "They *exist.* Even with their consciousness implants they hardly know what to do with themselves, Zoë. It's all too new to them. Their race has no experience with it. They don't just watch you because you entertain them. They watch you because you're teaching them how to be. You're teaching them how to live."

"I've never thought about it that way," I said.

"I know you haven't," Jane said. "You don't *have* to. Living comes naturally to you. More naturally than to some of the rest of us."

"It's been a year since any of them have seen me," I said. "Any of them but Hickory and Dickory. If I've been teaching them how to live, I wonder what they've been doing for the last year."

"They've been missing you," Mom said, and kissed the top of my head again. "And now you know why they'll do anything to have you back. And to keep you safe."

I didn't have a good answer to that. Mom gave me one last quick hug and headed to the door to join Dad and the Obin. "I don't know how long this is going to take us," she said. "Try going to bed again."

"I'm too worked up to get back to sleep," I said.

"If you get some sleep you'll probably be less worked up when you wake up," Jane said.

"Trust me, Mom," I said. "It's going to take something pretty big to get me over being worked up about all of this."

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NINETEEN

And wouldn't you know. Something big was arranged.

The Colonial Union showed up.

The shuttle landed and a little green man popped out. And I thought, *This seems familiar*. It was even the same little green man: General Rybicki.

But there were differences. The first time I saw General Rybicki, he was in my front yard, and it was just him and me. This time his shuttle landed in the grassy area right in front of Croatoan's gate, and a large chunk of the colony had turned out to see him land. He was our first visitor since we came to Roanoke, and his appearance seemed to give the idea that maybe we would finally be out of exile.

General Rybicki stood in front of the shuttle and looked at the people in front of him. He waved.

They cheered wildly. This went on for several minutes. It's like people had never seen someone wave before.

Finally the general spoke. "Colonists of Roanoke," he said. "I bring you good news. Your days of hiding are over." This was interrupted by another gout of cheering. When it calmed down, the general continued. "As I speak to you, my ship above is installing your communications satellite. Soon you will be able to send messages to friends and loved ones back on your home planets. And from here on out, all the electronic and communication equipment you had been ordered to stop

using will be returned to you." This got a huge whoop from the teenage sectors of the crowd.

"We know that we have asked much from you," Rybicki said. "I am here to tell you that your sacrifice has not been wasted. We believe that very soon now the enemy that has threatened you will be contained—and not just contained, but defeated. We couldn't have done this without you. So for all of the Colonial Union, I thank you."

More cheering and nonsense. The general seemed to be enjoying his moment in the sun.

"Now I must speak with your colony leaders to discuss how to reintegrate you into the Colonial Union. Some of this may take some time, so I ask you to be a little patient. But until then, let me just say this: Welcome back to civilization!"

Now the crowd really went nuts. I rolled my eyes and looked down at Babar, who went with me to the landing. "This is what happens when you spend a year out in the wilderness," I said. "Any dumb thing looks like entertainment." Babar looked up at me and lolled his tongue out; I could tell he agreed with me. "Come on, then," I said. And we walked through the crowd to the general, who I was supposed to escort back to my dad.

General Rybicki saw Babar before he saw me. "Hey!" he said, and bent down for his slobbering, which Babar duly and enthusiastically applied. He was a good dog but not a hugely accurate judge of character. "I remember you," he said to Babar, petting him. He looked up and saw me. "I remember you, too."

"Hello, General," I said, politely. The crowd was still milling around us but quickly dispersing as folks raced to all corners of the colony to pass on what they were told.

"You look taller," he said.

"It's been a year," I said. "And I am a growing girl. This despite being kept in the dark all this time."

The general seemed not to catch this. "Your mother said that you would be escorting me to see them. I'm a little surprised that they didn't come out themselves," he said.

"They've had a busy couple of days," I said. "As have we all."

"So colony life is more exciting than you thought it would be," the general said.

"Something like that," I said, and then motioned. "I know my dad is very interested in talking to you, General. Let's not keep him waiting."

I held my PDA in my hand. There was something not quite right about it.

Gretchen noticed it too. "It feels *weird*," she said. "It's been so long since we carried one around. It's like I've forgotten how to do it."

"You seemed to remember pretty well when we were using the ones in the information center," I said, reminding her of how we'd spent a fair amount of the last year.

"It's different," she said. "I didn't say I'd forgotten how to use one. I'm saying I've forgotten what it was like to carry one around. Two different things."

"You could always give it back," I said.

"I didn't say that," Gretchen said, quickly. Then she smiled. "Still, you have to wonder. In the last year people here actually *did* manage to get along without them just fine. All the hootenannies and the plays and the other stuff." She looked at her PDA. "Makes you wonder if they're all going to go away now."

"I think they're part of who we are now," I said. "As Roanokers, I mean."

"Maybe," Gretchen said. "It's a nice thought. We'll have to see if it's actually true."

"We could practice a new song," I said. "Hickory says Dickory's been wanting to try something new for a while now."

"That's funny," Gretchen said. "One of your bodyguards has become a musical fiend."

"He's a Roanoker too," I said.

"I guess he is," Gretchen said. "*That's* funny, too."

My PDA blinked; something happened with Gretchen's as well. She peered at hers. "It's a message from Magdy," she said. "This is going to

be bad." She touched the PDA to open it. "Yup," she said, and showed me the picture. Magdy sent a short video of him mooning us.

"Some people are getting back into the swing of things sooner than others," I said.

"Unfortunately," Gretchen said. She tapped onto her PDA. "There," she said. "I made a note to kick his ass the next time I see him." She motioned at my PDA. "He send it to you, too?"

"Yes," I said. "I think I'll refrain from opening it."

"Coward," Gretchen said. "Well, then, what is going to be your first official act on your PDA?"

"I'm going to send a message to a certain two someones," I said. "And tell them that I want to see them alone."

"We apologize for being late," Hickory said to me, as it and Dickory stepped into my bedroom. "Major Perry and General Rybicki gave us priority status on a data packet so that we could communicate with our government. It took some time to prepare the data."

"What did you send?" I asked.

"Everything," Hickory said.

"*Everything,*" I said. "Every single thing you two and I did in the last year."

"Yes," Hickory said. "A digest of events now, and a more comprehensive report as soon as we can. Our people will be desperate to know what has happened with you since they last heard from us. They need to know you are well and unharmed."

"This includes what happened last night," I said. "All of it. Including the part where you oh so lightly mentioned your plans to murder my parents."

"Yes," Hickory said. "We are sorry to have upset you, Zoë. We would not have wished to do that. But you offered us no alternative when you told us to speak the truth to your parents."

"And what about to me?" I asked.

"We have always told you the truth," Hickory said.

"Yes, but not all of it, have you?" I said. "You told Dad that you had information about the Conclave that you didn't tell him about. But

you didn't tell it to me, either. You kept secrets from me, Hickory. You and Dickory both."

"You never asked," Hickory said.

"Oh, don't give me that crap," I said. "We're not playing word games here, Hickory. You kept us in the dark. You kept me in the dark. And the more I've thought about it, the more I realize how you acted on what you knew without telling me. All those alien races you had me and Gretchen study in the information center. All the races you trained us how to fight. Hardly any of them were in the Conclave. Because you knew that if the Conclave found us first, they'd try everything *not* to fight us."

"Yes," Hickory said.

"Don't you think I should have known that?" I asked. "Don't you think it would have mattered to me? To all of us? To the entire colony?"

"We are sorry, Zoë," Hickory said. "We had orders from our government not to reveal information to your parents that they did not already know, until such time as it became absolutely necessary. That would have only been if the Conclave were to appear in your sky. Until then, we were required to exercise care. If we had spoken to you about it, you would have naturally informed your parents. And so we decided that we would not bring these things up with you, unless you asked us directly about them."

"And why would I do that?" I asked.

"Indeed," Hickory said. "We regret the necessity. But we saw no other alternative."

"Listen to me, both of you," I said, and then stopped. "You're recording this now, aren't you."

"Yes," Hickory said. "We always record, unless you tell us otherwise. Would you like us to stop recording?"

"No," I said. "I actually want all of you to hear this. First, I forbid you to harm my parents in any way. Ever."

"Major Perry has already informed us that he would surrender the colony rather than destroy it," Hickory said. "Since this is true there is no reason to harm either him or Lieutenant Sagan."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Who knows if there's going to be another time you decide it's going to be necessary to try to get rid of John and Jane?"

"It seems unlikely," Hickory said.

"I don't care if it's more likely that I was going to sprout wings," I said. "I didn't think it was *ever* possible that you might think to *kill my parents*, Hickory. I was wrong about that. I'm not going to be wrong about it again. So swear it. Swear you will never harm my parents."

Hickory spoke briefly to Dickory in their own language. "We swear it," Hickory said.

"Swear it for all Obin," I said.

"We cannot," Hickory said. "That is not something we can promise. It is not within our power. But neither Dickory nor I will seek to harm your parents. And we will defend them against all those who would try to harm them. Even other Obin. This we swear to you, Zoë."

It was the last part of this that made me believe Hickory. I hadn't asked him to defend John and Jane, just not harm them. Hickory added it in. They both did.

"Thank you," I said. I felt as if I were suddenly coming unwound; until that second I didn't realize how worked up I was just sitting there, talking about this. "Thank you both. I really needed to hear that."

"You are welcome, Zoë," Hickory said. "Is there something else you want to ask us?"

"You have files on the Conclave," I said.

"Yes," Hickory said. "We have already given them to Lieutenant Sagan for analysis."

That made perfect sense; Jane had been an intelligence officer when she was in the Special Forces. "I want to see them, too," I said. "Everything you have."

"We will provide them to you," Hickory said. "But there is a lot of information, and not all of it is easy to understand. Lieutenant Sagan is far more qualified to work with this information."

"I'm not saying give it to me and not her," I said. "I just want to see it too."

"If you wish," Hickory said.

"And anything else that you might get from your government on the Conclave," I said. "And I mean *all* of it, Hickory. None of this 'you didn't ask directly' junk from now on. We're done with that. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," Hickory said. "You understand that the information we receive might in itself be incomplete. We are not told everything."

"I know," I said. "But you still seem to know more than we do. And I want to understand what we're up against. Or were, anyway."

"Why do you say 'were'?" Hickory asked.

"General Rybicki told the crowd today that the Conclave was about to be defeated," I said. "Why? Do you know any different?"

"We do not know any different," Hickory said. "But we do not think that just because General Rybicki says something in public to a large crowd, it means he is telling the truth. Nor does it mean that Roanoke itself is entirely out of danger."

"But that doesn't make any sense," I said. I held up my PDA to Hickory. "We were told we can use these again. That we can use all of our electronics again. We had stopped using them because they would give us away. If we're allowed to use them again, we don't have to worry about being given away."

"That is one interpretation of the data," Hickory said.

"There's another?" I asked.

"The general did not say that the Conclave had been defeated, but that he believed they would be defeated," Hickory said. "That is correct?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then it is possible that the general means for Roanoke to play a part in the defeat of the Conclave," Hickory said. "In which case, it is not that you are being allowed to use your electronics because it is safe. You are being allowed to use them because you are now bait."

"You think the Colonial Union is leading the Conclave here," I said, after a minute.

"We offer no opinion one way or another," Hickory said. "We note only that it is possible. And it fits what data we have."

"Have you told my dad about this?" I asked.

"We have not—" Hickory began, but I was already out the door.

"Close the door behind you," Dad said.

I did.

"Who have you talked to about this?" he asked.

"Hickory and Dickory, obviously," I said. "No one else."

"No one?" Dad asked. "Not even Gretchen?"

"No," I said. Gretchen had gone off to harass Magdy for sending her that video. I was beginning to wish I had gone with her instead of making Hickory and Dickory come to my room.

"Good," Dad said. "Then you need to keep quiet about it, Zoë. You and the alien twins."

"You don't think what Hickory is saying is going to happen, do you?" I asked.

Dad looked directly at me, and once again I was reminded how much older he was than he appeared. "It *is* going to happen," he said. "The Colonial Union has laid a trap for the Conclave. We disappeared a year ago. The Conclave has been looking for us all that time, and the CU has spent all that time preparing the trap. Now it's ready, so we're being dragged back into view. When General Rybicki's ship goes back, they're going to let it leak where we are. The news will get back to the Conclave. The Conclave will send its fleet here. And the Colonial Union will destroy it. That's the plan, anyway."

"Is it going to work?" I asked.

"I don't know," Dad said.

"What happens if it doesn't?" I asked.

Dad laughed a very small and bitter laugh. "If it doesn't, then I don't think the Conclave is going to be in any mood for negotiations," he said.

"Oh, God," I said. "We have to tell people, Dad."

"I know we do," he said. "I tried keeping things from the colonists before, and it didn't work very well." He was talking about the werewolves there, and I reminded myself that when all this was done I needed to come clean to him about my own adventures with them. "But I also don't need another panic on our hands. People have been whipsawed enough in the last couple of days. I need to figure out a way to tell people what the CU has planned without putting them in fear for their lives."

"Despite the fact they should be," I said.

"That is the catch," Dad said, and gave another bitter chuckle. Then he looked at me. "It's not right, Zoë. This whole colony is built on a lie. Roanoke was never intended to be a real colony, a viable colony. It exists because our government needed a way to thumb its nose at the Conclave, to defy its colonization ban, and to buy time to build a trap. Now that it's had that time, the only reason our colony exists is to be a goat at a stake. The Colonial Union doesn't care about us for who we are, Zoë. It only cares about us for what we are. What we represent to them. What they can use us for. Who we are doesn't actually enter into it."

"I know the feeling," I said.

"I'm sorry," Dad said. "I'm getting both abstract and depressed."

"It's not abstract, Dad," I said. "You're talking to the girl whose life is a treaty point. I know what it means to be valued for what I am rather than who I am."

Dad gave me a hug. "Not here, Zoë," he said. "We love you for you. Although if you want to tell your Obin friends to get off their asses and help us, I wouldn't mind."

"Well, I did get Hickory and Dickory to swear not to kill you," I said. "So that's progress, at least."

"Yes, baby steps in the right direction," Dad said. "It'll be nice not to have to worry about being knifed by members of my household."

"There's always Mom," I said.

"Trust me, if I ever annoyed her that much, she wouldn't use something as painless as a knife," Dad said. He kissed me on the cheek. "Thanks for coming to tell me what Hickory said, Zoë," he said. "And thanks for keeping it to yourself for now."

"You're welcome," I said, and then headed for the door. I stopped before I turned the handle. "Dad? How long do you think it will take before the Conclave is here?"

"Not long, Zoë," he said. "Not long at all."

In fact, it took just about two weeks.

In that time, we prepared. Dad found a way to tell everyone the truth without having them panic: He told them that there was still a good chance the Conclave would find us and that the Colonial Union was planning on making a stand here; that there was still danger but that we had been in danger before, and that being smart and prepared was our best defense. Colonists called up plans to build bomb shelters and other protections, and used the excavation and construction machinery we'd kept packed up before. People kept to their work and stayed optimistic and prepared themselves as best they could, readying themselves for a life on the edge of a war.

I spent my time reading the stuff Hickory and Dickory gave me, watching the videos of the colony removals, and poring through the data to see what I could learn. Hickory and Dickory were right, there was just too much of it, and lots of it in formats I couldn't understand. I don't know how Jane managed to keep it all straight in her head. But what was there was enough to know a few different things.

First, the Conclave was huge: Over four hundred races belonged to it, each of them pledging to work together to colonize new worlds rather than compete for them. This was a wild idea; up until now all the hundreds of races in our part of space fought with each other to grab worlds and colonize them, and then once they created a new colony they all fought tooth and nail to keep their own and wipe out everyone else's. But in the Conclave setup, creatures from all sorts of races would live on the same planet. You wouldn't have to compete. In theory, a great idea—it beats having to try to kill everyone else in the area—but whether it would actually work was still up in the air.

Which brought up the second point: It was still incredibly new. General Gau, the head of the Conclave, had worked for more than twenty years to put it together, and for most of those years it kept looking like it was going to fall apart. It didn't help that the Colonial Union—us humans—and a few others expended a lot of energy to break it up even before it got together. But somehow Gau made it happen, and in the last couple of years had actually taken it from planning to practicality.

That wasn't a good thing for everyone who wasn't part of the Conclave, especially when the Conclave started making decrees, like

that no one who wasn't part of the Conclave could colonize any new worlds. Any argument with the Conclave was an argument with every member of the Conclave. It wasn't a one-on-one thing; it was a four-hundred-on-one thing. And General Gau made sure people knew it. When the Conclave started bringing fleets to remove those new colonies that other races planted in defiance, there was one ship in that fleet for every race in the Conclave. I tried to imagine four hundred battle cruisers suddenly popping up over Roanoke, and then remembered that if the Colonial Union's plan worked, I'd see them soon enough. I stopped trying to imagine it.

It was fair to wonder if the Colonial Union was insane for trying to pick a fight with the Conclave, but as big as it was, its newness worked against it. Every one of those four hundred allies had been enemies not too long ago. Each of them came in to the Conclave with its own plans and agenda, and not all of them, it seemed, were entirely convinced this Conclave thing was going to work; when it all came down, some of them planned to scoop up the choice pieces. It was still early enough for it all to fall apart, if someone applied just the right amount of pressure. It looked like the Colonial Union was planning to do that, up above Roanoke.

Only one thing was keeping it all together, and that was the third thing I learned: That this General Gau was in his way a remarkable person. He wasn't like one of those tin-pot dictators who got lucky, seized a country and gave themselves the title of Grand High Poobah or whatever. He had been an actual general for a people called the Vrenn, and had won some important battles for them when he decided that it was wasteful to fight over resources that more than one race could easily and productively share; when he started campaigning with this idea, he was thrown into jail. No one likes a troublemaker.

The ruler who tossed him in jail eventually died (Gau had nothing to do with it; it was natural causes) and Gau was offered the job, but he turned it down and instead tried to get other races to sign on to the idea of the Conclave. He had the disadvantage that he didn't get the Vrenn to go along with the idea at first; all he had to his name was an idea and a small battle cruiser called the *Gentle Star*, which he had gotten the Vrenn to give him after they decommissioned it. From what I could

read, it seemed like the Vrenn thought they were buying him off with it, as in "here, take this, thanks for your service, go away, no need to send a postcard, bye."

But he didn't go away, and despite the fact that his idea was insane and impractical and nuts and could never possibly work because every race in our universe hated every other race too much, it worked. Because this General Gau made it work, by using his own skills and personality to get people of all different races to work together. The more I read about him, the more it seemed like the guy was really admirable.

And yet he was also the person who had ordered the killing of civilian colonists.

Yes, he'd offered to move them and even offered to give them space in the Conclave. But when it came right down to it, if they wouldn't move and they wouldn't join, he wiped them out. Just like he would wipe us all out, if despite everything Dad told Hickory and Dickory we didn't surrender the colony—or if, should the attack the Colonial Union had planned on the Conclave fleet go wrong, the general decided that the CU needed to be taught a lesson for daring to defy the Conclave and wiped us out just on general principles.

I wasn't so sure just how admirable General Gau would be, if at the end of the day he wouldn't stop from killing me and every single person I cared about.

It was a puzzle. *He* was a puzzle. I spent those two weeks trying to sort it out. Gretchen got grumpy with me that I'd been locked away without telling her what I was up to; Hickory and Dickory had to remind me to get out and work on my training. Even Jane wondered if I might not need to get outside more. The only person not to give me much grief was Enzo; since we got back together he was actually very accommodating about my schedule. I appreciated that. I made sure he knew. He seemed to appreciate that.

And then just like that we all ran out of time. The *Gentle Star*, General Gau's ship, appeared above our colony one afternoon, disabled our communications satellite so Gau could have some time to chat, and then sent a message to Roanoke asking to meet with the colony leaders.

John replied that he would meet with him. That evening, as the sun set, they met on the ridge outside the colony, about a klick away.

"Hand me the binoculars, please," I said to Hickory, as we climbed out to the roof of the bungalow. It obliged me. "Thanks," I said. Dickory was below us, on the ground; old habits die hard.

Even with the binoculars General Gau and Dad were little more than dots. I looked anyway. I wasn't the only one; on other roofs, in Croatoan and in the homesteads, other people sat on roofs with binoculars and telescopes, looking at Dad and the general, or scanning the sky, looking in the dusk for the *Gentle Star*. As night finally fell, I spotted the ship myself; a tiny dot between two stars, shining unblinkingly where the other stars twinkled.

"How long until the other ships arrive, do you think?" I asked Hickory. The *Gentle Star* always arrived first, alone, and then at Gau's command, the hundreds of other ships would appear, a not-at-all-subtle bit of showmanship to get a reluctant colony leader to agree to get his or her people to leave their homes. I had watched it on previous colony removal videos. It would happen here, too.

"Not long now," Hickory said. "By now Major Perry will have refused to surrender the colony."

I took down my binoculars and glanced over to Hickory in the gloom. "You don't seem concerned about this," I said. "That's a different tune than you were singing before."

"Things have changed," Hickory said.

"I wish I had your confidence," I said.

"Look," Hickory said. "It has begun."

I glanced up. New stars had begun to appear in the sky. First one or two, then small groups, and then entire constellations. So many had begun to appear it was impossible to track every single appearance. I knew there were four hundred. It seemed like thousands.

"Dear God," I said, and I was afraid. Truly afraid. "Look at them all."

"Do not fear this attack, Zoë," Hickory said. "We believe this plan will work."

"You know the plan?" I asked. I didn't take my eyes off the sky.

"We learned of it this afternoon," Hickory said. "Major Perry told us, as a courtesy to our government."

"You didn't tell me," I said.

"We thought you knew," Hickory said. "You said you had spoken to Major Perry about it."

"We talked about the Colonial Union attacking the Conclave fleet," I said. "But we didn't talk about how."

"My apologies, Zoë," Hickory said. "I would have told you."

"Tell me now," I said, and then something happened in the sky.

The new stars started going nova.

First one or two, then small groups, and then entire constellations. So many expanded and brightened that they had begun to blend into each other, forming an arm of a small and violent galaxy. It was beautiful. And it was the worst thing I had ever seen.

"Antimatter bombs," Hickory said. "The Colonial Union learned the identity of the ships in the Conclave fleet. It assigned members of your Special Forces to locate them and plant the bombs just before the jump here. Another Special Forces member here activated them."

"Bombs on how many ships?" I asked.

"All of them," Hickory said. "All but the *Gentle Star.*"

I tried to turn to look at Hickory but I couldn't move my eyes from the sky. "That's impossible," I said.

"No," Hickory said. "Not impossible. Extraordinarily difficult. But not impossible."

From other roofs and from the streets of Croatoan, cheers and shouts lifted into the air. I finally turned away, and wiped the tears off my face.

Hickory noticed. "You cry for the Conclave fleet," it said.

"Yes," I said. "For the people on those ships."

"Those ships were here to destroy the colony," Hickory said.

"I know," I said.

"You are sorry they were destroyed," Hickory said.

"I am sorry that we couldn't think of anything better," I said. "I'm sorry that it had to be us or them."

"The Colonial Union believes this will be a great victory," Hickory said. "It believes that destroying the Conclave's fleet in one engagement

will cause the Conclave to collapse, ending its threat. This is what it has told my government."

"Oh," I said.

"It is to be hoped they are correct," Hickory said.

I was finally able to look away and face Hickory. The afterimages of the explosions placed blotches all around it. "Do you believe they are correct?" I asked. "Would your government believe it?"

"Zoë," Hickory said. "You will recall that just before you left for Roanoke, my government invited you to visit our worlds."

"I remember," I said.

"We invited you because our people longed to see you, and to see you among us," Hickory said. "We also invited you because we believed that your government was going to use Roanoke as a ruse to open a battle against the Conclave. And while we did not know whether this ruse would be successful, we believed strongly that you would have been safer with us. There is no doubt that your life has been in danger here, Zoë, both in ways we had foreseen and in ways that we could not. We invited you, Zoë, because we feared for you. Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

"I do," I said.

"You asked me if I believe the Colonial Union is correct, that this is a great victory, and if my government would believe the same," Hickory said. "My response is to say that once again my government extends an invitation to you, Zoë, to come visit our worlds, and to travel safe among them."

I nodded, and looked back to the sky, where stars were still going nova. "And when would you want this trip to begin?" I asked.

"Now," Hickory said. "Or as close to now as possible."

I didn't say anything to that. I looked up to the sky, and then closed my eyes and for the first time, started to pray. I prayed for the crews of the ships above me. I prayed for the colonists below me. I prayed for John and Jane. For Gretchen and her father. For Magdy and for Enzo and their families. For Hickory and Dickory. I prayed for General Gau. I prayed for everyone.

I prayed.

"Zoë," Hickory said.

I opened my eyes.

"Thank you for the invitation," I said. "I regret I must decline."

Hickory was silent.

"Thank you, Hickory," I said. "Really, thank you. But I am right where I belong."

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PART III

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TWENTY

"Admit it," Enzo said, through the PDA. "You forgot."

"I did not," I said, with what I hoped was just the right amount of indignation to suggest that I had not forgotten, which I had.

"I can hear the fake indignation," he said.

"Rats," I said. "You're on to me. Finally."

"Finally? There's no *finally,*" Enzo said. "I've been on to you since I met you."

"Maybe you have," I allowed.

"And anyway, that doesn't solve *this* problem," Enzo said. "We're about to sit down for dinner. You're supposed to be here. Not to make you feel guilty or anything."

This was the difference between me and Enzo now and then. There used to be a time when Enzo would have said those words and they would have come out sounding like he was accusing me of something (besides, of course, being late). But right now they were gentle and funny. Yes, he was exasperated, but he was exasperated in a way that suggested I might be able to make it up to him. Which I probably would, if he didn't push it.

"I am in fact wracked with guilt," I said.

"Good," Enzo said. "Because you know we put a whole extra potato in the stew for you."

"Gracious," I said. "A whole potato."

"And I promised the twins they could throw their carrots at you," he said, referring to his little sisters. "Because I know how much you

love carrots. Especially when they're kid-hurled."

"I don't know why anyone would eat them any other way," I said.

"And after dinner I was going to read you a poem I wrote for you," Enzo said.

I paused. "Now that's not fair," I said. "Injecting something real into our witty banter."

"Sorry," Enzo said.

"Did you really?" I asked. "You haven't written me a poem in ages."

"I know," he said. "I thought I might get back into practice. I remember you kind of liked it."

"You jerk," I said. "Now I really *do* feel guilty for forgetting about dinner."

"Don't feel too guilty," Enzo said. "It's not a very good poem. It doesn't even rhyme."

"Well, that's a relief," I said. I still felt giddy. It's nice to get poems.

"I'll send it to you," Enzo said. "You can read it instead. And then, maybe if you're nice to me, I'll read it to you. Dramatically."

"What if I'm mean to you?" I asked.

"Then I'll read it melodramatically," he said. "I'll wave my arms and everything."

"You're making a case for me being mean to you," I said.

"Hey, you're already missing dinner," Enzo said. "That's worth an arm wave or two."

"Jerk," I said. I could almost hear him smile over the PDA.

"Gotta go," Enzo said. "Mom's telling me to set the table."

"Do you want me to try to make it?" I asked. All of a sudden I really did want to be there. "I can try."

"You're going to run across the entire colony in five minutes?" Enzo said.

"I could do it," I said.

"Maybe Babar could," Enzo said. "But he has two legs more than you."

"Fine," I said. "I'll send Babar to have dinner with you."

Enzo laughed. "Do that," he said. "I'll tell you what, Zoë. Walk here at a reasonable pace, and you'll probably make it in time for

dessert. Mom made a pie."

"Yay, pie," I said. "What kind?"

"I think it's called 'Zoë gets whatever kind of pie she gets and likes it' pie," Enzo said.

"Mmmm," I said. "I always like that kind of pie."

"Well, yeah," Enzo said. "It's right there in the title."

"It's a date," I said.

"Good," Enzo said. "Don't forget. I know that's a problem for you."

"Jerk," I said.

"Check your mail queue," Enzo said. "There might be a poem there."

"I'm going to wait for the hand waving," I said.

"That's probably for the best," Enzo said. "It'll be better that way. And now my mom is glaring at me with laser eyeballs. I have to go."

"Go," I said. "See you soon."

"Okay," Enzo said. "Love you." We had started saying that to each other recently. It seemed to fit.

"Love you too," I said, and disconnected.

"You two make me want to vomit so hard," Gretchen said. She'd been hearing my side of the conversation and had been rolling her eyes the whole time. We were sitting in her bedroom.

I set down the PDA and whacked her with a pillow. "You're just jealous Magdy never says that to you."

"Oh, dear Lord," Gretchen said. "Leaving aside the fact that I *so do not* want to hear that from him, if he ever *did* try to say that to me, his head would actually *explode* before the words could even get out of his mouth. Which now that I think about it might be an excellent reason to try to get him to say it."

"You two are so cute," I said. "I can see you two standing at the altar and getting into it right before saying 'I do.' "

"Zoë, if I ever get anywhere near an altar with Magdy, I authorize you to make a flying tackle and drag me away," Gretchen said.

"Oh, fine," I said.

"Now let's never speak of this again," Gretchen said.

"You're so in denial," I said.

"At least I'm not the one who forgot her dinner date," Gretchen said.

"It gets worse," I said. "He wrote me poetry. He was going to read it to me."

"You missed dinner *and* a show," Gretchen said. "You are the worst girlfriend ever."

"I know," I said. I reached for my PDA. "I'll write him an apology note saying that."

"Make it extra grovelly," Gretchen said. "Because that's sexy."

"That comment explains a lot about you, Gretchen," I said, and then my PDA took on a life of its own, blasting an alarm sound from its speaker and scrolling an air attack notice on its screen. Over on Gretchen's desk, her PDA made the same alarm sound and scrolled the same message. Every PDA in the colony did the same. In the distance, we heard the sirens, posted near the Mennonite homesteads, alerting them because they didn't use personal technology.

For the first time since the defeat of the Conclave fleet, Roanoke was under attack. Missiles were on their way.

I rushed to the door of Gretchen's room. "Where are you going?" she asked. I ignored her and went outside, where people were bursting out of their homes and running for cover, and looked into the sky.

"What are you doing?" Gretchen said, catching up with me. "We need to get to a shelter."

"Look," I said, and pointed.

In the distance, a bright needle of light was tracing across the sky, aiming at something we couldn't quite see. Then there was a flash, blinding white. There was a defense satellite above Roanoke; it had fired on and hit one of the missiles coming for us. But others were still on their way.

The sharp pop of the missile explosion reached us, with not nearly enough time lag.

"Come *on,* Zoë," Gretchen said, and started tugging at me. "We've got to go."

I stopped looking at the sky and ran with Gretchen to one of the community shelters we had recently excavated and built; it was filling up quickly with colonists. As I ran I saw Hickory and Dickory, who

had spotted me; they closed in and took either side of me as we got into the shelter. Even in the panic, people still made room for them. Gretchen, Hickory, Dickory, about four dozen other colonists, and I all hunched down in the shelter, straining to hear what was going on above us through nearly a dozen feet of dirt and concrete.

"What do you think is happ—" someone said and then there was unspeakable wrenching noise, like someone had taken one of the cargo containers that made up the colony wall and peeled it apart, right on top of our eardrums and then I was tumbling to the ground because there was an earthquake and I screamed and bet that everyone else in the shelter did too but I couldn't hear it because then came the single loudest noise I had ever heard, so loud that my brain surrendered and the noise became the absence of noise, and the only way I knew that I, at least, was still screaming was that I could feel my throat getting raw. Either Hickory or Dickory grabbed me and held me steady; I could see Gretchen being held the same way by the other Obin.

The lights in the shelter flickered but stayed on.

Eventually I stopped screaming and the ground stopped shaking and something similar to my hearing came back to me and I could hear others in the shelter crying and praying and trying to calm children. I looked over at Gretchen, who looked stricken. I disentangled from Dickory (it turned out) and went over to her.

"You okay?" I asked. My voice sounded like it was pushed through cotton from a distance. Gretchen nodded but didn't look at me. It occurred to me it was the first time she'd been in an attack.

I looked around. Most of the people in the shelter looked like Gretchen. It was the first time any of these people had been in an attack. Of all these people, I was the one who was the veteran of a hostile attack. I guess that put me in charge.

I saw a PDA on the floor; someone had dropped it. I picked it up and activated it and read what was there. Then I stood up and waved my hands back and forth and said "Excuse me!" until people started looking at me. I think enough people recognized me as the daughter of the colony leaders that they decided I might know something after all.

"The emergency information on the PDA says that the attack seems to be over," I said when enough people were looking my way. "But

until we get an 'all clear' signal we need to stay here in the shelter. We need to stay here and stay calm. Is anyone here injured or sick?"

"I can't hear very well," someone said.

"I don't think any of us can hear well right now," I said. "That's why I'm yelling." It was an attempt at a joke. I don't think people were going for it. "Are there any injuries here besides hearing loss?" No one said anything or raised their hand. "Then let's just sit tight here and wait for the 'all clear.' " I held up the PDA I was using. "Whose is this?" Someone raised their hand; I asked if I could borrow it.

"Someone took 'in charge' lessons when I wasn't looking," Gretchen said when I sat back down next to her. The words were classic Gretchen, but the voice was very, very shaky.

"We were just under attack," I said. "If someone doesn't pretend like she knows what she's doing, people are going to start freaking out. That would be bad."

"Not arguing," Gretchen said. "Just impressed." She pointed to the PDA. "Can you send any messages? Can we find out what's happening?"

"I don't think so," I said. "The emergency system overrides usual messaging, I think." I signed out the owner on the PDA and signed in under my account. "See. Enzo said he sent that poem to me but it's not there yet. It's probably queued and will get sent once we have the all clear."

"So we don't know if everyone else is okay," Gretchen said.

"I'm sure we'll get an all clear signal soon," I said. "You worried about your dad?"

"Yes. Aren't you worried about *your* parents?" Gretchen asked.

"They were soldiers," I said. "They've done this before. I'm worried about them, but I'm betting they're fine. And Jane is the one running the emergency messages. As long as they're updating, she's fine." The PDA switched over from my mail queue to a scrolling note; we were being given the "all clear." "See," I said.

I had Hickory and Dickory check the entrance of the shelter for any falling debris; it was clear. I signed out from the PDA and gave it back to its owner, and then folks started shuffling out. Gretchen and I were the last to head up.

"Watch your step," Gretchen said as we came up, and pointed to the ground. Glass was everywhere. I looked around. All the houses and buildings were standing, but almost all the windows were blown out. We'd be picking glass out of everything for days.

"At least it's been nice weather," I said. No one seemed to hear me. Probably just as well.

I said good-bye to Gretchen and headed to my house with Hickory and Dickory. I found more glass in surprising places and Babar cowering in the shower stall. I managed to coax him out and gave him a big hug. He licked my face with increasing franticness. After I petted him and calmed him down, I reached for my PDA to call Mom or Dad, and then realized I had left it over at Gretchen's. I had Hickory and Dickory stay with Babar—he needed their company more than I did at the moment—and walked over to Gretchen's. As I walked to her house, her front door swung open and Gretchen burst through it, saw me and ran to me, her PDA in one hand and mine in the other.

"Zoë," she said, and then her face tightened up, and whatever she had to say was lost for a minute.

"Oh, no," I said. "Gretchen. Gretchen. What is it? Is it your dad? Is your dad okay?"

Gretchen shook her head, and looked up at me. "It's not my dad," she said. "My dad is fine. It's not Dad. Zoë, Magdy just called me. He says something hit. Hit Enzo's homestead. He said the house is still there but there's something big in the yard. He thinks it's part of a missile. Says he tried to call Enzo but he's not there. No one's there. No one's answering there. He said they just built a bomb shelter, away from the house. In the yard, Zoë. Magdy says he keeps calling and no one answers. I just called Enzo, too. I don't get anything, Zoë. It doesn't even connect. I keep trying. Oh God, Zoë. Oh God, Zoë. Oh, God."

Enzo Paulo Gugino was born on Zhong Guo, the first child of Bruno and Natalie Gugino. Bruno and Natalie had known each other since they were children and everyone who knew them knew that from the first moment they laid eyes on each other that they would be together

for every single moment of their lives. Bruno and Natalie didn't argue with this idea. Bruno and Natalie, as far as anyone ever knew, never argued about anything, and certainly didn't argue with each other. They married young, even for the deeply religious culture they lived in on Zhong Guo, in which people often married early. But no one could imagine the two of them not being together; their parents gave their consent and the two of them were married in one of the best-attended weddings anyone could remember in their hometown of Pomona Falls. Nine months later, almost to the day, there was Enzo.

Enzo was sweet from the moment he was born; he was always happy and only occasionally fussy, although (as was frequently explained, much to his later mortification) he had a marked tendency to take off his own diapers and smear the contents of them against the nearest available wall. This caused a real problem one time in a bank. Fortunately he was toilet-trained early.

Enzo met his best friend Magdy Metwalli in kindergarten. On the first day of school, a third-grader had tried to pick on Enzo, and pushed him hard down to the ground; Magdy, whom Enzo had never seen before in his life, launched himself at the third-grader and started punching him in the face. Magdy, who at the time was small for his age, did no real damage other than scaring the pee out of the third-grader (literally); it was Enzo who eventually pulled Magdy off the third-grader and calmed him down before they were all sent to the principal's office and then home for the day.

Enzo showed a flair for words early and wrote his first story when he was seven, entitled "The horrible sock that smelled bad and ate Pomona Falls except for my house," in which a large sock, mutated by its own horrible unwashed smell, started eating its way through the contents of an entire town and was thwarted only when the heroes Enzo and Magdy first punched it into submission and then threw it into a swimming pool filled with laundry soap. The first part of the story (about the origin of the sock) took three sentences; the climactic battle scene took three pages. Rumor is Magdy (the one reading the story, not the one in it) kept asking for more of the fight scene.

When Enzo was ten his mother became pregnant for a second time, with twins Maria and Katherina. The pregnancy was difficult, and

complicated because Natalie's body had a hard time keeping two babies in it at once; the delivery was a near thing and Natalie came close to bleeding out more than once. It took Natalie more than a year to fully recover, and during that time the ten- and eleven-year-old Enzo helped his father and mother to care for his sisters, learning to change diapers and feed the girls when his mom needed a rest. This was the occasion of the only real fight between Magdy and Enzo: Magdy jokingly called Enzo a sissy for helping his mom, and Enzo smacked him in the mouth.

When Enzo was fifteen the Guginos and the Metwallis and two other families they knew entered a group application to be part of the very first colony world made up of citizens of the Colonial Union rather than citizens of Earth. For the next few months every part of Enzo's life, and the life of his family, was opened up to scrutiny, and he bore it with as much grace as anyone who was fifteen and who mostly just wanted to be left alone could have. Every member of every family was required to submit a statement explaining why they wanted to be part of the colony. Bruno Gugino explained how he had been a fan of the American Colonization era, and the early history of the Colonial Union; he wanted to be part of this new chapter of history. Natalie Gugino wrote about wanting to raise her family on a world where everyone was working together. Maria and Katherina drew pictures of them floating in space with smiley moons.

Enzo, who loved words more and more, wrote a poem, imagining himself standing on a new world, and titled it "The Stars My Destination." He later admitted he'd taken the title from an obscure fantasy adventure book that he'd never read but whose title stayed with him. The poem, meant only for his application, was leaked to the local media and became something of a sensation. It eventually became sort of an official unofficial anthem for the Zhong Guo colonization effort. And after all that, Enzo and his family and co-applicants really couldn't *not* be chosen to go.

When Enzo had just turned sixteen, he met a girl, named Zoë, and for some reason that passes understanding, he fell for her. Zoë was a girl who seemed like she knew what she was doing most of the time and was happy to tell you that this was in fact the case, all the time, but in their private moments, Enzo learned that Zoë was as nervous and

uncertain and terrified that she would say or do something stupid to scare away this boy she thought she might love, as he was nervous and uncertain and terrified that he would do something stupid, too. They talked and touched and held and kissed and learned how not to be nervous and uncertain and terrified of each other. They did say and do stupid things, and they did eventually scare each other away, because they didn't know any better. But then they got over it, and when they were together again, that second time, they didn't wonder whether they might love each other. Because they knew they did. And they told each other so.

On the day Enzo died he talked to Zoë, joked with her about her missing the dinner she was supposed to have with his family, and promised to send her a poem he had written for her. Then he told her he loved her and heard her tell him she loved him. Then he sent her the poem and sat down with his family to dinner. When the emergency alert came, the Gugino family, father Bruno, mother Natalie, daughters Maria and Katherina, and son Enzo, went together into the attack shelter Bruno and Enzo had made just a week before, and sat together close, holding each other and waiting for the "all clear."

On the day Enzo died he knew he was loved. He knew he was loved by his mother and father who, like everyone knew, never stopped loving each other until the very moment they died. Their love for each other became their love for him, and for their daughters. He knew he was loved by his sisters, who he cared for when they were small, and when he was small. He knew he was loved by his best friend, who he never stopped getting out of trouble, and who he never stopped getting into trouble with. And he knew he was loved by Zoë—by me—who he called his love and who said the words back to him.

Enzo lived a life of love, from the moment he was born until the moment he died. So many people go through life without love. Wanting love. Hoping for love. Hungering for more of it than they have. Missing love when it was gone. Enzo never had to go through that. Would never have to.

All he knew all his life was love.

I have to think it was enough.

It would have to be, now.

I spent the day with Gretchen and Magdy and all of Enzo's friends, of whom there were so many, crying and laughing and remembering him, and then at some point I couldn't take any more because everyone had begun to treat me like Enzo's widow and though in a way I felt like I was, I didn't want to have to share that with anyone. It was mine and I wanted to be greedy for it for just a little while. Gretchen saw I had reached some sort of breaking point, and walked me back to her room and told me to get some rest, and that she'd check on me later. Then she gave me a fierce hug, kissed me on the temple and told me she loved me and closed the door behind me. I lay there in Gretchen's bed and tried not to think and did a pretty good job of it until I remembered Enzo's poem, waiting for me in my mail queue.

Gretchen had put my PDA on her desk and I walked over, took the PDA and sat back down on the bed, and pulled up my mail queue and saw the mail from Enzo. I reached to press the screen to retrieve it and then called up the directory instead. I found the folder titled "Enzo Dodgeball" and opened it and started playing the files, watching as Enzo flailed his way around the dodgeball court, taking hits to the face and tumbling to the ground with unbelievable comic timing. I watched until I laughed so hard that I could barely see, and had to put the PDA down for a minute to concentrate on the simple act of breathing in and out.

When I had mastered that again, I picked up the PDA, called up the mail queue, and opened the mail from Enzo.

Zoë:
Here you are. You'll have to imagine the arm waving for now. But the live show is coming! That is, after we have pie. Mmmm . . . pie.

BELONG

You said I belong to you
And I agree
But the quality of that belonging
Is a question of some importance.
I do not belong to you
Like a purchase
Something ordered and sold
And delivered in a box

To be put up and shown off
To friends and admirers.
I would not belong to you that way
And I know you would not have me so.
I will tell you how I belong to you.
I belong to you like a ring on a finger
A symbol of something eternal.
I belong to you like a heart in a chest
Beating in time to another heart.
I belong to you like a word on the air
Sending love to your ear.
I belong to you like a kiss on your lips
Put there by me, in the hope of more to come.
And most of all I belong to you
Because in where I hold my hopes
I hold the hope that you belong to me.
It is a hope I unfold for you now like a gift.
Belong to me like a ring
And a heart
And a word
And a kiss
And like a hope held close.
I will belong to you like all these things
And also something more
Something we will discover between us
And will belong to us alone.
You said I belong to you
And I agree.
Tell me you belong to me, too.
I wait for your word
And hope for your kiss.

Love you.
Enzo.

I love you, too, Enzo. I love you.
I miss you.

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TWENTY-ONE

The next morning I found out Dad was under arrest.

"It's not exactly arrest," Dad said at our kitchen table, having his morning coffee. "I've been relieved of my position as colony leader and have to travel back to Phoenix Station for an inquiry. So it's more like a trial. And if *that* goes badly then I'll be arrested."

"Is it going to go badly?" I asked.

"Probably," Dad said. "They don't usually have an inquiry if they don't know how it's going to turn out, and if it was going to turn out well, they wouldn't bother to have it." He sipped his coffee.

"What did you do?" I asked. I had my own coffee, loaded up with cream and sugar, which was sitting ignored in front of me. I was still in shock about Enzo, and this really wasn't helping.

"I tried to talk General Gau out of walking into the trap we set for him and his fleet," Dad said. "When we met I asked him not to call his fleet. Begged him not to, actually. It was against my orders. I was told to engage in 'nonessential conversation' with him. As if you can have nonessential conversation with someone who is planning to take over your colony, and whose entire fleet you're about to blow up."

"Why did you do it?" I asked. "Why did you try to give General Gau an out?"

"I don't know," Dad said. "Probably because I didn't want the blood of all those crews on my hands."

"You weren't the one who set off the bombs," I said.

"I don't think that matters, do you?" Dad said. He set down his cup. "I was still part of the plan. I was still an active participant. I still bear some responsibility. I wanted to know that at the very least I tried in some small way to avoid so much bloodshed. I guess I was just hoping there might be a way to do things other than the way that ends up with everyone getting killed."

I got up out of my chair and gave my dad a big hug. He took it, and then looked at me, a little surprised, when I sat back down. "Thank you," he said. "I'd like to know what that was about."

"It was me being happy that we think alike," I said. "I can tell we're related, even if it's not biologically."

"I don't think anyone would doubt we think alike, dear," Dad said. "Although given that I'm about to get royally shafted by the Colonial Union, I'm not sure it's such a good thing for you."

"I think it is," I said.

"And biology or not, I think we're both smart enough to figure out that things are not going well for anyone," Dad said. "This is a real big mess, nor are we out of it."

"Amen," I said.

"How are you, sweetheart?" Dad asked. "Are you going to be okay?"

I opened my mouth to say something and closed it again. "I think right now I want to talk about anything else in the world besides how I'm doing," I said, finally.

"All right," Dad said. He started talking about himself then, not because he was an egotist but because he knew listening to him would help me take my mind off my own worries. I listened to him talk on without worrying too much about what he said.

Dad left on the supply ship *San Joaquin* the next day, with Manfred Trujillo and a couple other colonists who were going as representatives of Roanoke, on political and cultural business. That was their cover, anyway. What they were really doing, or so Jane had told me, was trying to find out anything about what was going on in the universe involving Roanoke and who had attacked us. It would take a week for

Dad and the others to reach Phoenix Station; they'd spend a day or so there and then it would take another week for them to return. Which is to say, it'd take another week for everyone but Dad to return; if Dad's inquiry went against him, he wouldn't be coming back.

We tried not to think about that.

Three days later most of the colony converged on the Gugino homestead and said good-bye to Bruno and Natalie, Maria, Katherina, and Enzo. They were buried where they had died; Jane and others had removed the missile debris that had fallen on them, reshaped the area with new soil, and set new sod on top. A marker was placed to note the family. At some point in the future, there might be another, larger marker, but for now it was small and simple: the family name, the name of the members, and their dates. It reminded me of my own family marker, where my biological mother lay. For some reason I found this a little bit comforting.

Magdy's father, who had been Bruno Gugino's closest friend, spoke warmly about the whole family. A group of singers came and sang two of Natalie's favorite hymns from Zhong Guo. Magdy spoke, briefly and with difficulty about his best friend. When he sat back down, Gretchen was there to hold him while he sobbed. Finally we all stood and some prayed and others stood silently, with their heads bowed, thinking about missing friends and loved ones. Then people left, until it was just me and Gretchen and Magdy, standing silently by the marker.

"He loved you, you know," Magdy said to me, suddenly.

"I know," I said.

"*No,*" Magdy said, and I saw how he was trying to get across to me that he wasn't just making comforting words. "I'm not talking about how we say we love something, or love people we just like. He really loved you, Zoë. He was ready to spend his whole life with you. I wish I could make you believe this."

I took out my PDA, opened it to Enzo's poem, and showed it to Magdy. "I believe it," I said.

Magdy read the poem, nodded. Then he handed the PDA back to me. "I'm glad," he said. "I'm glad he sent that to you. I used to make

fun of him because he wrote you those poems. I told him that he was just being a goof." I smiled at that. "But now I'm glad he didn't listen to me. I'm glad he sent them. Because now you know. You know how much he loved you."

Magdy broke down as he tried to finish that sentence. I came up to him and held him and let him cry.

"He loved you too, Magdy," I said to him. "As much as me. As much as anyone. You were his best friend."

"I loved him too," Magdy said. "He was my brother. I mean, not my *real* brother . . ." He started to get a look on his face; he was annoyed with himself that he wasn't expressing himself like he wanted.

"No, Magdy," I said. "You were his real brother. In every way that matters, you were his brother. He knew you thought of him that way. And he loved you for it."

"I'm sorry, Zoë," Magdy said, and looked down at his feet. "I'm sorry I always gave you and Enzo a hard time. I'm sorry."

"Hey," I said, gently. "Stop that. You were supposed to give us a hard time, Magdy. Giving people a hard time is what you *do.* Ask Gretchen."

"It's true," Gretchen said, not unkindly. "It really is."

"Enzo thought of you as his brother," I said. "You're my brother too. You have been all this time. I love you, Magdy."

"I love you too, Zoë," Magdy said quietly, and then looked straight at me. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." I gave him another hug. "Just remember that as your new family member I'm now entitled to give you all sorts of crap."

"I can't wait," Magdy said, and then turned to Gretchen. "Does this make you my sister too?"

"Considering our history, you better hope not," Gretchen said. Magdy laughed at that, which was a good sign, then gave me a peck on a cheek, gave Gretchen a hug, and then walked from the grave of his friend and brother.

"Do you think he's going to be okay?" I asked Gretchen, as we watched him go.

"No," Gretchen said. "Not for a long time. I know you loved Enzo, Zoë, I really do, and I don't want this to sound like I'm trying to undercut that. But Enzo and Magdy were two halves of the same whole." She nodded to Magdy. "You lost someone you love. *He's* lost part of himself. I don't know if he's going to get over that."

"You can help him," I said.

"Maybe," Gretchen said. "But think about what you're asking me to do."

I laughed. It's why I loved Gretchen. She was the smartest girl I ever knew, and smart enough to know that being smart had its own repercussions. She could help Magdy, all right, by becoming part of what he was missing. But it meant her being that, one way or another, for the rest of their lives. She would do it, because when it came down to it she really did love Magdy. But she was right to worry about what it meant for her.

"Anyway," Gretchen said, "I'm not done helping someone else."

I snapped out of my thoughts at that. "Oh," I said. "Well. You know. I'm okay."

"I know," Gretchen said. "I also know you lie horribly."

"I can't fool you," I said.

"No," Gretchen said. "Because what Enzo was to Magdy, I am to you."

I hugged her. "I know," I said.

"Good," Gretchen said. "Whenever you forget, I'll remind you."

"Okay," I said. We unhugged and Gretchen left me alone with Enzo and his family, and I sat with them for a long time.

Four days later, a note from Dad from a skip drone from Phoenix Station.

A miracle, it said. *I'm not headed for prison. We are heading back on the next supply ship. Tell Hickory and Dickory that I will need to speak to them when I return. Love you.*

There was another note for Jane, but she didn't tell me what was in it.

"Why would Dad want to talk to you?" I asked Hickory.

"We don't know," Hickory said. "The last time he and I spoke of anything of any importance was the day—I am sorry—that your friend Enzo died. Some time ago, before we left Huckleberry, I had mentioned to Major Perry that the Obin government and the Obin people stood ready to assist you and your family here on Roanoke should you need our assistance. Major Perry reminded me of that conversation and asked me if the offer still stood. I told him that at the time I believed it did."

"You think Dad is going to ask for your help?" I asked.

"I do not know," Hickory said. "And since I last spoke to Major Perry circumstances have changed."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Dickory and I have finally received detailed updated information from our government, up to and including its analysis of the Colonial Union's attack on the Conclave fleet," Hickory said. "The most important piece of news is that we have been informed that shortly after the *Magellan* disappeared, the Colonial Union came to the Obin government and asked it not to search for the Roanoke colony, nor to offer it assistance if it were to be located by the Conclave or any other race."

"They knew you would come looking for me," I said.

"Yes," Hickory said.

"But why would they tell you not to help us?" I asked.

"Because it would interfere with the Colonial Union's own plans to lure the Conclave fleet to Roanoke," Hickory said.

"That's happened," I said. "That's done. The Obin can help us now," I said.

"The Colonial Union has asked us to continue not to offer aid or assistance to Roanoke," Hickory said.

"That makes no sense," I said.

"We are inclined to agree," Hickory said.

"But that means that you can't even help *me*," I said.

"There is a difference between you and the colony of Roanoke," Hickory said. "The Colonial Union cannot ask us not to protect or assist you. It would violate the treaty between our peoples, and the Colonial Union would not want to do that, especially now. But the

Colonial Union may choose to interpret the treaty narrowly and has. Our treaty concerns you, Zoë. To a much lesser extent it concerns your family, meaning Major Perry and Lieutenant Sagan. It does not concern Roanoke colony at all."

"It does when I *live* here," I said. "This colony is of a great deal of concern to *me.* Its people are of a great deal of concern to *me.* Everybody I care about in the whole universe is here. Roanoke matters to me. It should matter to you."

"We did not say it did not matter to *us,*" Hickory said, and I heard something in its voice I had never heard before: *reproach*. "Nor do we suggest it does not matter to you, for many reasons. We are telling you how the Colonial Union is asking the Obin government to view its rights under treaty. And we are telling you that our government, for its own reasons, has agreed."

"So if my dad asks for your help, you will tell him no," I said.

"We will tell him that so long as Roanoke is a Colonial Union world, we are unable to offer help."

"So, *no,*" I said.

"Yes," Hickory said. "We are sorry, Zoë."

"I want you to give me the information your government has given you," I said.

"We will do so," Hickory said. "But it is in our native language and file formatting, and will take a considerable amount of time for your PDA to translate."

"I don't care," I said.

"As you wish," Hickory said.

Not too long after that I stared at the screen of my PDA and ground my teeth together as it slowly plodded through file transformations and translations. I realized it would be easier just to ask Hickory and Dickory about it all, but I wanted to see it all with my own eyes. However long it took.

It took long enough that I had hardly read any of it by the time Dad and the others had made it home.

"This all looks like gibberish to me," Gretchen said, looking at the documents I was showing her on my PDA. "It's like it was translated from monkey or something."

"Look," I said. I pulled up a different document. "According to this, blowing up the Conclave fleet backfired. It was supposed to make the Conclave collapse and all the races start shooting at each other. Well, the Conclave is starting to collapse, but hardly any of them are actually fighting each other. They're attacking Colonial Union worlds instead. They really messed this up."

"If you say this is what it says, I'm going to believe you," Gretchen said. "I'm not actually finding verbs here."

I pulled up another document. "Here, this is about a Conclave leader named Nerbros Eser. He's General Gau's main competition for leadership of the Conclave now. Gau still doesn't want to attack the Colonial Union directly, even though we just destroyed his fleet. He still thinks the Conclave is strong enough to keep doing what it's been doing. But this Eser guy thinks the Conclave should just wipe us out. The Colonial Union. And especially us here on Roanoke. Just to make the point that you don't mess with the Conclave. The two of them are fighting over control of the Conclave right now."

"Okay," Gretchen said. "But I still don't know what any of this *means,* Zoë. Speak not-hyper-ese to me. You're losing me."

I stopped and took a breath. Gretchen was right. I'd spent most of the last day reading these documents, drinking coffee, and not sleeping; I was not at the peak of my communication skills. So I tried again.

"The whole point of founding Roanoke colony was to start a war," I said.

"It looks like it worked," Gretchen said.

"No," I said. "It was supposed to start a war *within* the Conclave. Blowing up their fleet was supposed to tear the Conclave apart from the inside. It would end the threat of this huge coalition of alien races and bring things back to the way it was before, when every race was fighting every other race. We trigger a civil war, and then we sweep in while they're all fighting and scoop up the worlds we want and come out of it all stronger than before—maybe too strong for any one race or even a small group of races to square off against. That was the plan."

"But you're telling me it didn't work that way," Gretchen said.

"Right," I said. "We blew up the fleet and got the Conclave members fighting, but who they're fighting is *us.* The reason we didn't like the Conclave is that it was four hundred against one, the one being us. Well, now it's still four hundred against one, except now no one's listening to the one guy who was keeping them from engaging in total war against us."

"Us here on Roanoke," Gretchen said.

"Us everywhere," I said. "The Colonial Union. Humans. *Us.* This is happening now," I said. "Colonial Union worlds are being attacked. Not just the new colony worlds, the ones that usually get attacked. Even the established colonies—the ones that haven't been attacked in decades—are getting hit. And unless General Gau gets them all back in line, these attacks are going to keep happening. They're going to get worse."

"I think you need a new hobby," Gretchen said, handing me back my PDA. "Your new one here is really depressing."

"I'm not trying to scare you," I said. "I thought you would want to know about all this."

"You don't have to tell me," Gretchen said. "You need to tell your parents. Or my dad. Someone who actually knows what to do about all this."

"They already know," I said. "I heard John and Jane talking about it last night after he got back from Phoenix Station. Everyone there knows the colonies are under attack. No one's *reporting* it—the Colonial Union has a lockdown on the news—but everyone's talking about it."

"What does that leave for Roanoke?" Gretchen said.

"I don't know," I said. "But I know we don't have a lot of pull right now."

"So we're all going to die," Gretchen said. "Well. Gee. Thanks, Zoë. I'm really glad to know it."

"It's not that bad yet," I said. "Our parents are working on it. They'll figure it out. We're not all going to die."

"Well, *you're* not going to die, at least," Gretchen said.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"If things really go swirling, the Obin will swoop in and take you out of here," Gretchen said. "Although if all of the Colonial Union is really under attack, I'm not sure where you're going to end up going. But the point is, you have an escape route. The rest of us don't."

I stared at Gretchen. "That's incredibly unfair," I said. "I'm not going anywhere, Gretchen."

"Why?" Gretchen said. "I'm not *angry* at you that you have a way out, Zoë. I'm *envious.* I've been through one attack. Just one missile got through and it didn't even explode properly, and it still did incredible damage and killed someone I care about and everyone in his family. When they come for us for real, we don't have a chance."

"You still have your training," I said.

"I'm not going to be able to engage in single combat with a *missile,* Zoë," Gretchen said, annoyed. "Yes, if someone decides to have a landing party here, I might be able to fight them off for a while. But after what we've done to that Conclave fleet, do you think anyone is really going to bother? They're just going to blow us up from the sky. You said it yourself. They want to be rid of us. And you're the only one that has a chance of getting out of here."

"I already said I'm not going anywhere," I said.

"Jesus, Zoë," Gretchen said. "I love you, I really do, but I can't believe you're actually that dumb. If you have a chance to go, *go.* I don't want you to die. Your mom and dad don't want it. The Obin will hack a path through all the rest of us to keep you from dying. I think you should take the hint."

"I get the hint," I said. "But you don't understand. I've *been* the sole survivor, Gretchen. It's happened to me before. Once is enough for any lifetime. I'm not going anywhere."

"Hickory and Dickory want you to leave Roanoke," Dad said to me, after he had paged me with his PDA. Hickory and Dickory were standing in the living room with him. I was clearly coming in on some sort of negotiation between them. And it was also clearly about me. The tone of Dad's voice was light enough that I could tell he was

hoping to make some point to the Obin, and I was pretty sure I knew what the point was.

"Are you and Mom coming?" I said.

"No," Dad said.

This I expected. Whatever was going to happen with the colony, both John and Jane would see it through, even if it meant they would die with it. It's what they expected of themselves as colony leaders, as former soldiers, and as human beings.

"Then to hell with that," I said. I looked at Hickory and Dickory when I said it.

"Told you," Dad said to Hickory.

"You didn't tell her to come away," Hickory said.

"Go away, Zoë," Dad said. This was said with such a sarcastic delivery that even Hickory and Dickory couldn't miss it.

I gave a less-than-entirely-polite response to that, and then to Hickory and Dickory, and then, for good measure, to the whole idea that I was something special to the Obin. Because I was feeling saucy, and also because I was tired of the whole thing. "If you want to protect me," I said to Hickory, "then protect this colony. Protect the people I care about."

"We cannot," Hickory said. "We are forbidden to do so."

"Then you have a problem," I said, "because I'm not going anywhere. And there's nothing you or anyone else can do about it." And then I left, dramatically, partly because I think that was what Dad was expecting, and partly because I was done saying what I wanted to say on the matter.

Then I went to my room and waited for Dad to call me again. Because whatever was going on between him and Hickory and Dickory, it wasn't over when I stomped out of the room. And like I said, whatever it was, was clearly about me.

About ten minutes later Dad called for me again. I went back into the living room. Hickory and Dickory were gone.

"Sit down, Zoë, please," Dad said. "I need you to do something for me."

"Does it involve leaving Roanoke?" I asked.

"It does," Dad said.

"No," I said.

"Zoë," Dad said.

"*No*," I said again. "And I don't understand you. Ten minutes ago you were happy to have me stand here in front of Hickory and Dickory and tell them I wasn't going anywhere, and now you want me to leave? What did they tell you to make you change your mind?"

"It's what I told them," Dad said. "And I haven't changed my mind. I need you to go, Zoë."

"For what?" I said. "So I can stay alive while everyone I care about dies? You and Mom and Gretchen and Magdy? So I can be saved when Roanoke is destroyed?"

"I need you to go so I can *save* Roanoke," Dad said.

"I don't understand," I said.

"That's probably because you didn't actually let me *finish* before you got on your soapbox," Dad said.

"Don't mock me," I said.

Dad sighed. "I'm not trying to mock you, Zoë. But what I really need from you right now is to be quiet so I can tell you about this. Can you do that, please? It will make things go a lot more quickly. Then if you say no, at least you'll be saying no for the right reasons. All right?"

"All right," I said.

"Thank you," Dad said. "Look. Right now all of the Colonial Union is under attack because we destroyed the Conclave fleet. Every CU world has been hit. The Colonial Defense Forces are strained as it is, and it's going to get worse. A lot worse. The Colonial Union is already making decisions about what colonies it can afford to lose when push comes to shove."

"And Roanoke is one of those," I said.

"Yes," Dad said. "Very definitely. But it's more than that, Zoë. There was a possibility that I might have been able to ask the Obin to help us here on Roanoke. Because you were here. But the Colonial Union has told the Obin not to help us at all. They can take you from here, but they can't help you or us defend Roanoke. The Colonial Union doesn't want them to help us."

"Why not?" I asked. "That doesn't make any sense."

"It doesn't make sense if you assume the Colonial Union wants Roanoke to *survive,*" Dad said. "But look at it another way, Zoë. This is the first colony with colonists from the CU rather than Earth. The settlers here are from the ten most powerful and most populous Colonial Union worlds. If Roanoke is destroyed, all ten of those worlds are going to be hit hard by the loss. Roanoke will become a rallying cry for those worlds. And for the whole Colonial Union."

"You're saying we're worth more to the Colonial Union dead than alive," I said.

"We're worth more as a symbol than as a colony," Dad said. "Which is inconvenient for those of us who live here and want to stay alive. But, yes. It's why they won't let the Obin help us. It's why we don't make the cut for resources."

"You know this for sure?" I asked. "Someone told you this when you went back to Phoenix Station?"

"Someone did," Dad said. "A man named General Szilard. He was Jane's former commanding officer. It was unofficial, but it matched up with my own internal math."

"And you trust him?" I asked. "No offense, but the Colonial Union hasn't exactly been on the up-and-up with us lately."

"I have my issues with Szilard," Dad said. "And so does your mom. But yes. I trust him on this. Right now he's the only one in the whole Colonial Union I actually *do* trust."

"What does this have to with me leaving Roanoke?" I asked.

"General Szilard told me something else when I saw him," Dad said. "Also unofficial, but from good sources. He told me that General Gau, the Conclave leader—"

"I know who he is, Dad," I said. "I've been keeping up with current events."

"Sorry," Dad said. "He said General Gau was being targeted for assassination by someone in his own close circle of advisors, and that the assassination would happen soon, probably in the next few weeks."

"Why'd he tell you this?" I asked.

"So I could use it," Dad said. "Even if the Colonial Union wanted to tell General Gau about the attempt—which it doesn't, since it probably would like to see it succeed—there's no reason to believe that

Gau would consider it credible. The CU *did* just blow up his fleet. But Gau might listen to the information if it came from me, because he's already had dealings with me."

"And you were the one who begged him not to bring his fleet to Roanoke," I said.

"Right," Dad said. "It's because of that we've been attacked as little as we have. General Gau said to me that neither he nor the Conclave would retaliate against Roanoke itself for what happened to the fleet."

"We were still attacked," I said.

"But not by the Conclave itself," Dad said. "By someone else, testing our defenses. But if Gau is assassinated, that guarantee dies with him. And then it's open season on Roanoke, and we'll get hit, fast, because we're where the Conclave had its biggest defeat. We're a symbol for the Conclave, too. So we have to let General Gau know he's in danger. For our own sake."

"If you tell him this, you'll be giving information to an enemy of the Colonial Union," I said. "You'll be a traitor."

Dad gave me a wry grin. "Trust me, Zoë," he said. "I'm already neck-deep in trouble." His smile disappeared. "And yes, General Gau is an enemy of the Colonial Union. But I think he might be a friend to Roanoke. Right now, Roanoke needs all the friends it can get, wherever it can get them. The ones we used to have are turning their backs on us. We're going out to this new one, hat in hand."

"And by *we* you mean *me,*" I said.

"Yes," Dad said. "I need you to deliver this message for me."

"You don't need me to do it," I said. "You could do it. Mom could do it. It would be *better* from either of you."

Dad shook his head. "Neither Jane nor I can leave Roanoke, Zoë. The Colonial Union is watching us. They don't trust us. And even if we could, we can't leave because we belong here with the colonists. We're their leaders. We can't abandon them. Whatever happens to them happens to us too. We made a promise to them and we're going to stay and defend this colony, no matter what happens. You understand that." I nodded. "So we can't go.

"But *you* can, and secretly," Dad said. "The Obin already want to take you off Roanoke. The Colonial Union will allow it because it's

part of their treaty with the Obin, and as long as Jane and I stay here, it won't raise an eyebrow. The Obin are technically neutral in the fight between the Conclave and the Colonial Union; an Obin ship will be able to get to General Gau's headquarters where a ship from the Colonial Union couldn't."

"So send Hickory and Dickory," I said. "Or just have the Obin send a skip drone to General Gau."

"It won't work," Dad said. "The Obin are not going to jeopardize their relationship with the Colonial Union to pass messages for *me.* The only reason they're doing this at all is because I'm agreeing to let them take you off Roanoke. I'm using the only piece of leverage I have with the Obin, Zoë. That's you.

"And there's something else. General Gau has to know that I believe the information I'm sending him is good. That I'm not just being a pawn again in a larger Colonial Union game. I need to give him a token of my sincerity, Zoë. Something that proves that I have as much to risk in sending him this information as he has in receiving it. Even if I or Jane could go ourselves, General Gau would have no reason to trust what we say to him, because he knows both Jane and I were soldiers and are leaders. He knows we would be willing to sacrifice ourselves for our colony. But he also knows that I'm *not* willing to sacrifice my only daughter. And neither is Jane.

"So you see, Zoë. It has to be you. No one else can do it. You're the only one who can get to General Gau, deliver the message, and be believed. Not me, not Jane, not Hickory and Dickory. No one else. Just you. Deliver the message, and we might still find a way to save Roanoke. It's a small chance. But right now it's the only one we've got."

I sat there for a few minutes, taking in what Dad asked of me. "You know if Hickory and Dickory take me off Roanoke, they're not going to want to bring me back," I said, finally. "You know that."

"I'm pretty sure of it," Dad said.

"You're asking me to leave," I said. "You're asking me to accept that I might not ever see any of you again. Because if General Gau won't believe me, or if he's killed before I can talk to him, or even if he does

believe me but can't do anything to help us, this trip won't mean anything. All it will do is get me off Roanoke."

"If that's all it did, Zoë, I still wouldn't complain," Dad said, and then quickly held up his hand, to stop me from commenting on that. "But if that's *all* I thought it would do, I wouldn't ask you to do it. I know you don't want to leave Roanoke, Zoë. I know you don't want to leave us or your friends. I don't want anything bad to happen to you, Zoë. But you're also old enough now to make your own decisions. If when all was said and done you wanted to stay on Roanoke to face whatever came our way, I wouldn't try to stop you. Nor would Jane. We would be with you until the end. You know that."

"I do," I said.

"There are risks for everyone," Dad said. "When Jane and I tell the Roanoke colony council about this—which we will do once you're gone—I'm pretty sure they are going to kick us out as the colony leaders. When news gets back to the Colonial Union, Jane and I are almost certainly going to be arrested on charges of treason. Even if everything goes perfectly, Zoë, and General Gau accepts your message and acts on it and maybe even makes sure that Roanoke stays unmolested, we will still have to pay for our actions. Jane and I accept this. We think it's worth it for a chance to keep Roanoke safe. The risk for you here, Zoë, is that if you do this, you might not see us or your friends again for a very long time, or at all. It's a big risk. It's a real risk. You have to decide whether it's one worth taking."

I thought about this some more. "How long do I have to think about this?" I asked.

"All the time you need," Dad said. "But those assassins aren't sitting around doing nothing."

I glanced over to where Hickory and Dickory had been. "How long do you think it will take them to get a transport here?" I asked.

"Are you kidding?" Dad said. "If they didn't send for one the second I was done talking to them, I'll eat my hat."

"You don't wear a hat," I said.

"I will buy a hat and eat it, then," Dad said.

"I'm going to come back," I said. "I'm going to take this message to General Gau, and then I'm going to get back here. I'm not sure how

I'm going to convince the Obin of that, but I'm going to do it. I promise you, Dad."

"Good," Dad said. "Bring an army with you. And guns. And battle cruisers."

"Guns, cruisers, army," I said, running down the checklist. "Anything else? I mean, as long as I'm going *shopping.*"

"Rumor is that I might be in the market for a hat," Dad said.

"Hat, right," I said.

"Make it a jaunty hat," he said.

"I promise nothing," I said.

"Fine," Dad said. "But if you have to choose between the hat and the army, pick the army. And make it a good one. We're going to need it."

"Where is Gretchen?" Jane asked me. We stood outside the small Obin transport. I had already said good-bye to Dad. Hickory and Dickory waited for me inside the transport.

"I didn't tell her I was leaving," I said.

"She is going to be very upset about that," Mom said.

"I don't intend to be away long enough for her to miss me," I said. Mom didn't say anything to that.

"I wrote her a note," I said, finally. "It's scheduled for delivery tomorrow morning. I told her what I thought I could tell her about why I left. I told her to talk to you about the rest of it. So she might come by to see you."

"I'll talk to her about it," Jane said. "I'll try to make her understand."

"Thanks," I said.

"How are you?" Mom asked.

"I'm terrified," I said. "I'm scared I'll never see you or Dad or Gretchen again. I'm scared I'm going to screw this up. I'm scared that even if I don't screw this up it won't matter. I feel like I'm going to pass out, and I've felt that way since this thing landed."

Jane gave me a hug and then looked to my neck, puzzled. "You're not taking your jade elephant pendant?" she said.

"Oh," I said. "It's a long story. Tell Gretchen I said for her to tell it to you. You need to know about it anyway."

"Did you lose it?" Jane asked.

"It's not lost," I said. "It's just not with me anymore."

"Oh," Jane said.

"I don't need it anymore," I said. "I know who in this world loves me, and has loved me."

"Good," Jane said. "What I was going to tell you is that as well as remembering who loves you, you should remember who you are. And everything about who you are. And everything about *what* you are."

"What I am," I said, and smirked. "It's because of *what* I am that I'm leaving. *What* I am has been more trouble than it's worth, if you ask me."

"That doesn't surprise me," Jane said. "I have to tell you, Zoë, that there have been times when I have felt sorry for you. So much of your life has been completely out of your control. You've lived your life under the gaze of an entire race of people, and they have made their demands on you right from the beginning. I'm always amazed you've stayed sane through all of it."

"Well, you know," I said. "Good parents help."

"Thank you," Jane said. "We tried to keep your life as normal as possible. And I think we've raised you well enough that I can tell you this and have you understand it: What you are has made demands of you all your life. Now it's time to demand something back. Do you understand?"

"I'm not sure," I said.

"*Who* you are has always had to make room for *what* you are," Jane said. "You know that."

I nodded. It had.

"Part of that was because you were young, and what you are is so much larger than who you are," Jane said. "You can't expect a normal eight-year-old or even a fourteen-year-old to understand what it means to be something like what you are. But you're old enough now to understand it. To get an appreciation for it. To know how you can use it, for something besides trying to stay up late."

I smiled, amazed that Jane remembered me trying to use the treaty to stay up past my bedtime.

"I've watched you in the last year," Jane said. "I've seen how you interact with Hickory and Dickory. They've imposed a lot on you because of what you are. All that training and practicing. But you've also started asking more of them. All those documents you've had them give you."

"I didn't know you knew about that," I said.

"I was an information officer," Jane said. "This sort of thing is my job. My point is that you've become more willing to use that power. You are finally taking control of your life. *What* you are is starting to make room for *who* you are."

"It's a start," I said.

"Keep going," Jane said. "We need *who* you are, Zoë. We need you to take what you are—*every* part of what you are—and use it to save us. To save Roanoke. And to come back to us."

"How do I do it?" I asked.

Jane smiled. "Like I said: Demand something back," she said.

"That's unhelpfully vague," I said.

"Perhaps," Jane said, and then kissed me on the cheek. "Or maybe I just have faith that you're smart enough to figure it out on your own."

Mom got a hug for that.

Ten minutes later I was fifteen klicks above Roanoke and climbing, heading for an Obin transport, thinking about what Jane had said.

"You will find that our Obin ships travel far more quickly than your Colonial Union ships," Hickory said.

"Is that right," I said. I wandered over to where Hickory and Dickory had placed my luggage and picked out one of the suitcases.

"Yes," Hickory said. "Far more efficient engines and better artificial gravity management. We will reach skip distance from Roanoke in a little under two days. It would take one of your ships five or six days to reach the same distance."

"Good," I said. "The sooner we get to General Gau the better." I unzipped the suitcase.

"This is a very exciting moment for us," Hickory said. "This is the first time since you have lived with Major Perry and Lieutenant Sagan

that you will meet other Obin in person."

"But they know all about me," I said.

"Yes," Hickory said. "The recordings of the last year have made their way to all Obin, both in unedited and digest form. The unedited versions will take time to process."

"I'll bet," I said. "Here we are." I found what I was looking for: the stone knife, given to me by my werewolf. I had packed it quickly, when no one was looking. I was just making sure that I didn't imagine packing it.

"You brought your stone knife," Hickory said.

"I did," I said. "I have plans for it."

"What plans?" Hickory asked.

"I'll tell you later," I said. "But tell me, Hickory," I said. "This ship we're going to. Is there anyone important on it?"

"Yes," Hickory said. "Because it is the first time that you have been in the presence of other Obin since you were a child, one of the members of Obin's governing council will be there to greet you. It very much wants to meet with you."

"Good," I said, and glanced at the knife. "I very much want to meet with it, too."

I think I actually made Hickory nervous right then.

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TWENTY-TWO

"Demand something back," I said to myself as I waited for the Obin council member to greet me in my stateroom. "Demand something back. Demand something back."

I'm definitely going to throw up, I thought.

You can't throw up, I answered myself. *You haven't figured out the plumbing yet. You don't know what to throw up into.*

That at least was true. The Obin don't *excrete* or take care of their personal hygiene the same way humans do, and they don't have the same issues with modesty that we do when they're with others of their own race. In the corner of my stateroom was an interesting array of holes and spigots that looked like something that you would *probably* use for bathroom purposes. But I had no idea what was what. I didn't want to use the thing that I thought was the sink, only to find out later it was supposed to be the toilet. Drinking from the toilet was fine for Babar, but I like to think I have higher standards.

This was definitely going to be an issue in another hour or two. I would have to ask Hickory or Dickory about it.

They weren't with me because I asked to be taken directly to my stateroom when we took off and then asked to be alone for an hour, at which point I wanted to see the council member. I think that by doing that, I messed up some sort of ceremonial welcome from the crew of the Obin transport (called *Obin Transport 8532,* in typical and boring Obin efficiency), but I didn't let that bother me. It did have the effect I was going for at the moment: I had decided I was going to be a little bit

difficult. Being a little bit difficult was going to make it easier, I hoped, to do what I needed to do next. Which was to try to save Roanoke.

My dad had his own plan to do that, and I was going to help him with it. But I was thinking up a plan of my own. All it needed me to do was to demand something back.

Something really, really, really *big*.

Oh, well, my brain said. *If this doesn't work at least you can ask this council guy where you're supposed to pee.* Yes, well, that *would* be something.

There was a knock on my stateroom door, and the door then slid open. There was no lock on the door because Obin among themselves didn't have much of a concept of privacy (no signal on the door, either, for the same reason). Three Obin entered the room: Hickory and Dickory, and a third Obin who was new to me.

"Welcome, Zoë," it said to me. "We welcome you at the start of your time with the Obin."

"Thank you," I said. "Are you the council member?"

"I am," it said. "My name is Dock."

I tried very hard to keep a smile off my face and failed miserably. "You said your name was Dock," I said.

"Yes," it said.

"As in 'Hickory, Dickory, Dock,' " I said.

"That is correct," it said.

"That's quite a coincidence," I said, once I got my face back under control.

"It is not a coincidence," Dock said. "When you named Hickory and Dickory, we learned of the nursery rhyme from which you derived the names. When I and many other Obin chose names for ourselves, we chose words from the rhyme."

"I knew there were other Hickorys and Dickorys," I said. "But you're telling me that there are other Obin named 'Dock,' too."

"Yes," said Dock.

"And 'Mouse' and 'Clock,' " I said.

"Yes," said Dock.

"What about 'Ran,' 'Up,' and 'The'?" I asked.

"Every word in the rhyme is popular as a name," said Dock.

"I hope some of the Obin know they've named themselves after a definite article," I said.

"We are all aware of the meaning of the words," Dock said. "What was important is the association to you. You named these two 'Hickory' and 'Dickory.' Everything followed from there."

I had been getting sidetracked by the idea that an entire fearsome race of aliens had given themselves goofy names because of the names I had thoughtlessly given two of them more than a decade before; this comment by Dock snapped me back into focus. It was a reminder that the Obin, with their new consciousness, had so identified with me, so imprinted on me, even as a child, that even a nursery rhyme I liked carried weight.

Demand something back.

My stomach cramped up. I ignored it.

"Hickory," I said. "Are you and Dickory recording right now?"

"Yes," Hickory said.

"Stop please," I said. "Councilor Dock, are you recording this right now?"

"I am," it said. "Although only for my personal recollection."

"Please stop," I said. They all stopped recording.

"Have we offended you?" Dock asked.

"No," I said. "But I don't think you'll want this as part of the permanent record." I took a deep breath. "I require something from the Obin, Councilor."

"Tell me what it is," Dock said. "I will try to find it for you."

"I require the Obin to help me defend Roanoke," I said.

"I am afraid we are unable to help you with that request," Dock said.

"It's not a request," I said.

"I do not understand," Dock said.

"I said, it's not a request. I didn't *request* the Obin's help, Councilor. I said I *require* it. There's a difference."

"We cannot comply," Dock said. "The Colonial Union has requested that we provide no assistance to Roanoke."

"I don't *care,*" I said. "What the Colonial Union wants at this point means absolutely nothing to me. The Colonial Union is planning to let

everyone I care about die because it's decided Roanoke is more useful as a symbol than a colony. I don't give a crap about the symbolism. I care about the people. My friends and family. They need help. And I require it from you."

"Assisting you means breaking our treaty with the Colonial Union," Dock said.

"Your treaty," I said. "That would be the one that allows you access to me."

"Yes," Dickory said.

"You realize you *have* me," I said. "On this ship. Technically on Obin territory. You don't need Colonial Union permission to see me anymore."

"Our treaty with the Colonial Union is not only about access to you," Dock said. "It covers many issues, including our access to the consciousness machines we wear. We cannot go against this treaty, even for you."

"Then don't break it," I said, and this is where I mentally crossed my fingers. I knew the Obin would say they couldn't break their treaty with the Colonial Union; Hickory had said so before. This is where things were about to get *really* tricky. "I require the Obin help me defend Roanoke, Councilor. I didn't say the Obin had to do it themselves."

"I am afraid I do not understand you," Dock said.

"Get someone else to help me," I said. "Hint to them that the help would be appreciated. Do whatever you have to do."

"We would not be able to hide our influence," Dock said. "The Colonial Union will not be swayed by the argument that our forcing another race to act on your behalf does not constitute interference."

"Then ask someone the Colonial Union knows you can't force," I said.

"Whom do you suggest?" Dock asked.

There's an old expression for when you do something completely crazy. "Shooting the moon," it's called.

This was me raising my rifle.

"The Consu," I said.

Blam. There went my shot at a *very* faraway moon.

But it was a shot I had to take. The Obin were obsessed with the Consu, for perfectly excellent reasons: How could you *not* be obsessed with the creatures that gave you intelligence, and then ignored you for the rest of eternity? The Consu had spoken to the Obin only once since they gave them consciousness, and that conversation came at the high cost of half of all Obin, everywhere. I remembered that cost. I planned to use it to my advantage now.

"The Consu do not speak to us," Dock said.

"Make them," I said.

"We do not know how," Dock said.

"Find a way," I said. "I *know* how the Obin feel about the Consu, Councilor. I've studied them. I've studied you. Hickory and Dickory made a story about them. Obin's first creation myth, except it's true. I know how you got them to speak to you. And I know you've tried to get them to speak to you again since then. Tell me it's not true."

"It's true," Dock said.

"I'm willing to guess you're still working on it even now," I said.

"We are," Dock said. "We have been."

"Now is the time to make that happen," I said.

"There is no guarantee that the Consu would help you, even if we convinced them to speak to us and hear our plea on your behalf," Dock said. "The Consu are unknowable."

"I understand that," I said. "It's worth a try anyway."

"Even if what you ask were possible, it would come at a high cost," Dock said. "If you knew what it cost us the last time we spoke to the Consu—"

"I know *exactly* how much it cost," I said. "Hickory told me. And I know the Obin are used to paying for what they get. Let me ask you, Councilor. What did you get from my biological father? What did you get from Charles Boutin?"

"He gave us consciousness," Dock said, "as you well know. But it came at a price. Your father asked for a war."

"Which you never gave him," I said. "My father died before you could pay up. You got his gift for free."

"The Colonial Union asked for a price to finish his work," Dock said.

"That's between you and the Colonial Union," I said. "It doesn't take anything away from what my father did, or the fact you never paid for it. I am his daughter. I am his heir. The fact you are here says that the Obin give me the honor they would give him. I could say to you that you *owe* me what you owe him: a war, at least."

"I cannot say that we owe you what we owed your father," Dock said.

"Then what do you owe *me*?" I asked. "What do you owe me for what *I've* done for you? What is your name?"

"My name is Dock," it said.

"A name you have because one day I named those two Hickory and Dickory," I said, pointing at my two friends. "It's only the most obvious example of what you have through me. My father gave you consciousness, but you didn't know what to *do with it*, did you? None of you did. All of you learned what to do with your consciousness by watching me grow into mine, as a child and now as who I am today. Councilor, how many Obin have watched my life? Seen how I did things? Learned from me?"

"All of them," Dock said. "We have all learned from you, Zoë."

"What has it cost the Obin?" I asked. "From the time Hickory and Dickory came to live with me, until the moment I stepped onto this ship, what has it cost you? What have I ever asked of any Obin?"

"You have not asked for anything," Dock said.

I nodded. "So let's review. The Consu gave you intelligence and it cost you half of all the Obin when you came to ask them why they did it. My father gave you consciousness, and the price for it was a war, a price which you would have willingly paid had he lived. I have given you ten years of lessons on how to be conscious—on how to *live*. The bill for that has come due, Councilor. What price do I require? Do I require the lives of half the Obin in the universe? No. Do I require the Obin to commit to a war against an entire other race? No. I require only your help to save my family and friends. I don't even require that the Obin do it themselves, only that they find a way to have someone else do it for them. Councilor, given the Obin's history of what it's received and what it has cost, what I am requiring of the Obin now comes very *cheap* indeed."

Dock stared at me, silently. I stared back, mostly because I had forgotten to blink through all of that and I was afraid if I tried to blink now I might scream. I think it was making me look unnervingly calm. I could live with that.

"We were to send a skip drone when you arrived," Dock said. "It has not been sent yet. I will let the rest of the Obin council know of your requirement. I will tell them I support you."

"Thank you, Councilor," I said.

"It may take some time to decide on a course of action," Dock said.

"You don't have time," I said. "I am going to see General Gau, and I am going to deliver my dad's message to him. The Obin council has until I am done speaking to General Gau to act. If it has not, or will not, then you will leave General Gau without me."

"You will not be safe with the Conclave," Dock said.

"Are you under the impression that I will tolerate being among the Obin if you refuse me?" I said. "I keep telling you this: I am not *asking* for this. I am *requiring* it. If the Obin will not do this, they lose me."

"That would be very hard for some of us to accept," Dock said. "We had already lost you for a year, Zoë, when the Colonial Union hid your colony."

"Then what will you do?" I asked. "Drag me back onto the ship? Hold me captive? Record me against my will? I don't imagine that will be very *entertaining*. I know what I am to the Obin, Councilor. I know what uses you have all put me to. I don't think you will find me very useful after you refuse me."

"I understand you," Dock said. "And now I must send this message. Zoë, it is an honor to meet you. Please excuse me." I nodded. Dock left.

"Please close the door," I said to Hickory, who was the closest to it. It did.

"Thank you," I said, and threw up all over my shoes. Dickory was over to me immediately and caught me before I could fall completely.

"You are ill," Hickory said.

"I'm fine," I said, and then threw up all over Dickory. "Oh, God, Dickory," I said. "I'm so sorry."

Hickory came over, took me from Dickory and guided me toward the strange plumbing. It turned on a tap and water came bubbling out.

"What is that?" I asked.

"It is a sink," Hickory said.

"You're sure?" I asked. Hickory nodded. I leaned over and washed my face and rinsed my mouth out.

"How do you feel?" Hickory said, after I had cleaned myself off as best I could.

"I don't think I'm going to throw up anymore, if that's what you mean," I said. "Even if I wanted to, there's nothing left."

"You vomited because you are sick," Hickory said.

"I vomited because I just treated one of your leaders like it was my cabin boy," I said. "That's a new one for me, Hickory. It really is." I looked over at Dickory, who was covered in my upchuck. "And I hope it works. Because I think if I have to do that again, my stomach might just flop right out on the table." My insides did a flip-flop after I said that. Note to self: After having vomited, watch the overly colorful comments.

"Did you mean it?" Hickory said. "What you said to Dock?"

"Every word," I said, and then motioned at myself. "Come on, Hickory. Look at me. You think I'd put myself through all of *this* if I wasn't serious?"

"I wanted to be sure," Hickory said.

"You can be sure," I said.

"Zoë, we will be with you," Hickory said. "Me and Dickory. No matter what the council decides. If you choose to stay behind after you speak to General Gau, we will stay with you."

"Thank you, Hickory," I said. "But you don't have to do that."

"We do," Hickory said. "We would not leave you, Zoë. We have been with you for most of your life. And for all the life that we have spent conscious. With you and with your family. You have called us part of your family. You are away from that family now. You may not see them again. We would not have you be alone. We belong with you."

"I don't know what to say," I said.

"Say you will let us stay with you," Hickory said.

"Yes," I said. "Do stay. And thank you. Thank you both."

“You are welcome,” Hickory said.

“And now as your first official duties, find me something new to wear,” I said. “I’m starting to get really ripe. And then tell me which of those things over there is the toilet. Because now I really need to know.”

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TWENTY-THREE

Something was nudging me awake. I swatted at it. "Die," I said.

"Zoë," Hickory said. "You have a visitor."

I blinked up at Hickory, who was framed as a silhouette by the light coming from the corridor. "What are you talking about?" I said.

"General Gau," Hickory said. "He is here. Now. And wishes to speak to you."

I sat up. "You have got to be kidding me," I said. I picked up my PDA and looked at the time.

We had arrived in Conclave space fourteen hours earlier, popping into existence a thousand klicks out from the space station that General Gau had made the administrative headquarters of the Conclave. He said he hadn't wanted to favor one planet over another. The space station was ringed with hundreds of ships from all over Conclave space, and even more shuttles and cargo transports, going between ships and back and forth from the station. Phoenix Station, the largest human space station and so big I've heard that it actually affected tides on the planet Phoenix (by amounts measurable only by sensitive instruments, but still), would have fit into a corner of the Conclave HQ.

We had arrived and announced ourselves and sent an encrypted message to General Gau requesting an audience. We had been given parking coordinates and then willfully ignored. After ten hours of that, I finally went to sleep.

"You know I do not kid," Hickory said. It walked back to the doorway and turned up the lights in my stateroom. I winced. "Now,

please," Hickory said. "Come to meet him."

Five minutes later I was dressed in something I hoped would be presentable and walking somewhat unsteadily down the corridor. After a minute of walking I said, "Oh, crap," and ran back to my stateroom, leaving Hickory standing in the corridor. A minute later I was back, bearing a shirt with something wrapped in it.

"What is that?" Hickory asked.

"A gift," I said. We continued our trip through the corridor.

A minute later I was standing in a hastily arranged conference room with General Gau. He stood to one side of a table surrounded by Obin-style seats, which were not really well designed either for his physiology or mine. I stood on the other, shirt in my hand.

"I will wait outside," Hickory said, after it delivered me.

"Thank you, Hickory," I said. It left. I turned and faced the general. "Hi," I said, somewhat lamely.

"You are Zoë," General Gau said. "The human who has the Obin to do her bidding." His words were in a language I didn't understand; they were translated through a communicator device that hung from his neck.

"That's me," I said. I heard my words translated into his language.

"I am interested in how a human girl is able to commandeer an Obin transport ship to take her to see me," General Gau said.

"It's a long story," I said.

"Give me the short version," Gau said.

"My father created special machines that gave the Obin consciousness. The Obin revere me as the only surviving link to my father. They do what I ask them to," I said.

"It must be nice to have an entire race at your beck and call," Gau said.

"You should know," I said. "You have four hundred races at yours. Sir."

General Gau did something with his head that I was going to hope was meant to be a smile. "That's a matter of some debate at this point, I'm afraid," he said. "But I am confused. I was under the impression that you are the daughter of John Perry, administrator of the Roanoke Colony."

"I am," I said. "He and his wife Jane Sagan adopted me after my father died. My birth mother had died some time before that. It is on my adopted parents' account that I am here now. Although I apologize"—I motioned to myself, and my state of unreadiness—"I didn't expect to meet you here, now. I thought we would come to you, and I would have time to prepare."

"When I heard that the Obin were ferrying a human to see me, and one from Roanoke, I was curious enough not to want to wait," Gau said. "I also find value in making my opposition wonder what I am up to. My coming to visit an Obin ship rather than waiting to receive their embassy will make some wonder who you are, and what I know that they don't."

"I hope I'm worth the trip," I said.

"If you're not, I'll still have made them nervous," Gau said. "But considering how far you've come, I hope for both our sakes the trip has been worth it. Are you completely dressed?"

"What?" I said. Of the many questions I might have been expecting, this wasn't one of them.

The general pointed to my hand. "You have a shirt in your hands," he said.

"Oh," I said, and put the shirt on the table between us. "It's a gift. Not the shirt. There's something wrapped in the shirt. That's the gift. I was hoping to find something else to put it in before I gave it to you, but you sort of surprised me. I'm going to shut up now and let you just have that."

The general gave me what I think was a strange look, and then reached out and unwrapped what was in the shirt. It was the stone knife given to me by the werewolf. He held it up and examined it in the light. "This is a very interesting gift," he said, and began moving it in his hand, testing it, I guessed, for weight and balance. "And quite a nicely designed knife."

"Thank you," I said.

"Not precisely modern weaponry," he said.

"No," I said.

"Figured that a general must have an interest in archaic weapons?" Gau asked.

"Actually there's a story behind it," I said. "There's a native race of intelligent beings on Roanoke. We didn't know about them before we landed. Not too long ago we met up with them for the first time, and things went badly. Some of them died, and some of us died. But then one of them and one of us met and decided not to try to kill each other, and exchanged gifts instead. That knife was one of those gifts. It's yours now."

"That's an interesting story," Gau said. "And I think I'm correct in supposing that this story has some implication for why you're here."

"It's up to you, sir," I said. "You might just decide it's a nice stone knife."

"I don't think so," Gau said. "Administrator Perry is a man who plays with subtext. It's not lost on me what it means that he has sent his daughter to deliver a message. But then to offer this particular gift, with its particular story. He's a man of some subtlety."

"I think so, too," I said. "But the knife is not from my dad. It's from me."

"Indeed," Gau said, surprised. "That's even more interesting. Administrator Perry didn't suggest it?"

"He doesn't know I had the knife," I said. "And he doesn't know how I got it."

"But you *did* intend to send me a message with it," Gau said. "One to complement your adopted father's."

"I hoped you'd see it that way," I said.

Gau set the knife down. "Tell me what Administrator Perry has to tell me," he said.

"You're going to be assassinated," I said. "Someone is going to try, anyway. It's someone close to you. Someone in your trusted circle of advisors. Dad doesn't know when or how, but he knows that it's planned to happen soon. He wanted you to know so you could protect yourself."

"Why?" General Gau asked. "Your adopted father is an official of the Colonial Union. He was part of the plan that destroyed the Conclave fleet and has threatened everything I have worked for, for longer than you have been alive, young human. Why should I trust the word of my enemy?"

"The Colonial Union is your enemy, not my dad," I said.

"Your *dad* helped kill tens of thousands," Gau said. "Every ship in my fleet was destroyed but my own."

"He begged you not to call your ships to Roanoke," I said.

"This was a place where he was all too subtle," Gau said. "He never explained how the trap had been set. He merely asked me not to call my fleet. A little more information would have kept thousands alive."

"He did what he could," I said. "You were there to destroy our colony. He wasn't allowed to surrender it to you. You know he didn't have many options. And as it was he was recalled by the Colonial Union and put on trial for even hinting to you that something might happen. He could have been sent to prison for the simple act of speaking to you, General. He did what he could."

"How do I know he's not just being used again?" Gau asked.

"You said you knew what it meant that he sent me to give you a message," I said. "I'm the proof that he's telling you the truth."

"You're the proof he *believes* he's telling me the truth," Gau said. "It's not to say that it *is* the truth. Your adopted father was used once. Why couldn't he be used again?"

I flared at this. "Begging your pardon, General," I said. "But you should know that by sending me to send you this warning, both my dad and my mom are absolutely assured of being labeled as traitors by the Colonial Union. They are both going to prison. You should know that as part of the deal to get the Obin to bring me to you, I can't go back to Roanoke. I have to stay with them. Because they believe that it's only a matter of time before Roanoke is destroyed, if not by you then by some part of the Conclave you don't have any control over anymore. My parents and I have risked *everything* to give you this warning. It's possible I'll never see them or anyone else on Roanoke again, because I am giving you this warning. Now, General, do you think any of us would do *any* of this if we were not absolutely certain about what we are telling you? Do you?"

General Gau said nothing for a moment. Then, "I am sorry you have all had to risk so much," he said.

"Then do my dad the honor of *believing* him," I said. "You're in danger, General. And that danger is closer than you think."

"Tell me, Zoë," Gau said, "what does Administrator Perry hope to get from telling me this? What does he want from me?"

"He wants you to stay alive," I said. "You promised him that as long as you were running the Conclave, you wouldn't attack Roanoke again. The longer you stay alive, the longer we stay alive."

"But there's the irony," Gau said. "Thanks to what happened at Roanoke, I'm not in as much control as I was. My time now is spent keeping others in line. And there are those who are looking at Roanoke as a way to take control from me. I'm sure you don't know about Nerbros Eser—"

"Sure I do," I said. "Your main opposition right now. He's trying to convince people to follow him. Wants to destroy the Colonial Union."

"I apologize," Gau said. "I forgot you're not just a messenger girl."

"It's all right," I said.

"Nerbros Eser is planning to attack Roanoke," Gau said. "I have been getting the Conclave back under my control—too slowly—but enough races support Eser that he has been able to fund an expedition to take Roanoke. He knows the Colonial Union is too weak to put up a defense of the colony, and he knows that at the moment I am in no position to stop him. If he can take Roanoke where I could not, more Conclave races could side with him. Enough that they would attack the Colonial Union directly."

"You can't help us, then," I said.

"Other than to tell you what I just have, no," Gau said. "Eser is going to attack Roanoke. But in part because Administrator Perry helped to destroy my fleet, there is no way I can do much to stop him now. And I doubt very much that your Colonial Union will do much to stop him."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Because you are *here,*" General Gau said. "Make no mistake, Zoë, I do appreciate your family's warning. But Administrator Perry is not so kind that he would have warned me out of his own simple goodness. As you've noted, the cost is too high for that. You are here because you have nowhere else to turn."

"But you believe Dad," I said.

"Yes," Gau said. "Unfortunately. Someone in my position is always a target. But now of all times I know that even some of those who I've trusted with my life and friendship are calculating the costs and deciding that I'm worth more to them dead than alive. And it makes sense for someone to try for me before Eser attacks Roanoke. If I'm dead and Eser takes revenge on your colony, no one else will even try to challenge him for control of the Conclave. Administrator Perry isn't telling me anything I don't know. He's only confirming what I do know."

"Then I've been no use to you," I said. And *you've been no use to me,* I thought but did not say.

"I wouldn't say that," Gau said. "One of the reasons I am here now is so that I could hear what you had to say to me without anyone else involved. To find out what I could do with the information you might have. To see if it has use to me. To see if *you* are of use to me."

"You already knew what I told you," I said.

"This is true," Gau said. "However, no one *else* knows how much you know. Not here, in any event." He reached over and picked up the stone knife and looked at it again. "And the truth of the matter is that I'm getting tired of not knowing, of those whom I trust, which is planning to stab me in the heart. Whoever is planning to assassinate me is going to be in league with Nerbros Eser. They are likely to know when he plans to attack Roanoke, and with how large a force. And perhaps working together we can find out both of these things."

"How?" I asked.

General Gau looked at me again, and did that I-hope-it's-a-smile thing with his head. "By doing a bit of political theater. By making them think we know what they do. By making them act because of it."

I smiled back at Gau. " 'The play is the thing in which I shall catch the conscience of the king,' " I said.

"Precisely," Gau said. "Although it will be a traitor we catch, not a king."

"In that quote he was both," I said.

"Interesting," Gau said. "I'm afraid I don't know the reference."

"It's from a play called *Hamlet,*" I said. "I had a friend who liked the playwright."

"I like the quote," Gau said. "And your friend."

"Thanks," I said. "I do too."

"One of you in this chamber is a traitor," General Gau said. "And I know which one of you it is."

Wow, I thought. *The general sure knows how to start a meeting.*

We were in the general's official advisors' chamber, an ornate room, which, the general told me beforehand, he never used except to receive foreign dignitaries with some semblance of pomp and circumstance. Since he was technically receiving me for this particular meeting, I felt special. But more to the point, the room featured a small raised platform with steps, on which sat a large chair. Dignitaries, advisors and their staff all approached it like it was a throne. This was going to be useful for what General Gau had in mind for today.

In front of the platform, the room opened up into a semicircle. Around the perimeter stood a curving bar, largely of standing height for most sentient species in the Conclave. This is where advisors' and dignitaries' staff stood, calling up documents and data when needed and whispering (or whatever) into small microphones that fed into earpieces (or whatever) worn by their bosses.

Their bosses—the advisors and dignitaries—filed into the area between the bar and the platform. Usually, I was told, they would have benches or chairs (or whatever suited their body shape best) offered to them so they could rest as they did their business. Today, they were all standing.

As for me, I was standing to the left and just in front of the general, who was seated in his big chair. On the opposite side of the chair was a small table, on which lay the stone knife, which I had just (and for the second time) presented to the general. This time it was delivered in packaging more formal than a shirt. The general had taken it out of the box I had found, admired it, and set it on the table.

Back along with the staff stood Hickory and Dickory, who were not happy with the plan the general had come up with. With them were three of the general's security detail, who were likewise not very pleased at all.

Well, now that we were doing it, I'm not sure I was entirely thrilled with it either.

"I thought we were here to hear a request from this young human," said one of the advisors, a tall Lalan (that is, tall even for a Lalan) named Hafte Sorvalh. Her voice was translated by the earpiece I had been given by the Obin.

"It was a pretense," Gau said. "The human has no petition, but information pertaining to which one of you intends to assassinate me."

This naturally got a stir in the chamber. "It is a human!" said Wert Ninung, a Dwaer. "No disrespect, General, but the humans recently destroyed the entire Conclave fleet. Any information they would share with you should be regarded as highly suspect, to say the least."

"I agree with this entirely, Ninung," Gau said. "Which is why when it was provided to me I did what any sensible person would have done and had my security people check the information thoroughly. I regret to say that the information was good. And now I must deal with the fact that one of my advisors—someone who was privy to all my plans for the Conclave—has conspired against me."

"I don't understand," said a Ghlagh whose name, if I could remember correctly, was Lernin Il. I wasn't entirely sure, however; Gau's security people had given me dossiers on Gau's circle of advisors only a few hours before the meeting, and given everything else I needed to do to prepare, I had barely had time to skim.

"What don't you understand, Lernin?" asked General Gau.

"If you know which of us is the traitor, why hasn't your security detail already dealt with them?" Il asked. "This could be done without exposing you to an unnecessary risk. Given your position you don't need to take any more risks than are absolutely necessary."

"We are not talking about some random killer, Il," the general said. "Look around you. How long have we known each other? How hard have each of us worked to create this great Conclave of races? We have seen more of each other over time than we have seen of our spouses and children. Would any of you have accepted it if I were to make one of you disappear over a vague charge of treason? Would that not seem to each of you that I was losing my grip and creating scapegoats? No, Il.

We have come too far and done too much for that. Even this would-be assassin deserves better courtesy than that."

"What do you intend to do, then?" asked Il.

"I will ask the traitor in this room to come forward," he said. "It's not too late to right this wrong."

"Are you offering this assassin amnesty?" asked some creature whose name I just did not remember (or, given how it spoke, I suspect I could not actually pronounce, even if I did remember it).

"No," Gau said. "This person is not acting alone. They are part of a conspiracy that threatens what all of us have worked for." Gau gestured to me. "My human friend here has given me a few names, but that is not enough. For the security of the Conclave we need to know more. And to show all the members of the Conclave that treason cannot be tolerated, my assassin must answer for what they have done to this point. What I do offer is this: That they will be treated fairly and with dignity. That they will serve their term of punishment with some measure of comfort. That their family and loved ones will not be punished or held responsible, unless they themselves are conspirators. And that their crime will not be made known publicly. Every one outside this room will know only that this conspirator has retired from service. There will be punishment. There must be punishment. But there will not be the punishment of history."

"I want to know where this human got its information," said Wert Ninung.

Gau nodded to me. "This information ultimately comes from the Colonial Union's Special Forces division," I said.

"The same group that spearheaded the destruction of the Conclave fleet," Wert said. "Not especially trustworthy."

"Councilor Wert," I said, "how do you think the Special Forces were able to locate every one of the ships of your fleet? The only time it assembles is when it removes a colony. Locating four hundred ships among the tens of thousands that each race alone has at its disposal was an unheard of feat of military intelligence. After that, do you doubt that the Special Forces had difficulty coming up with a single name?"

Wert actually growled at me. I thought that was rude.

“I have already told you that I have had the information checked out,” General Gau said. “There is no doubt it is accurate. That is not under discussion. What is under discussion is how the assassin will choose to be discovered. I repeat: The assassin is in this room, right now, among us. If they will come forward now, and share information on their other conspirators, their treatment will be generous, light and secret. The offer is in front of you now. I beg you, as an old friend, to take it. Come forward now.”

No one in the room moved. General Gau stared at each of his advisors, directly and in the eye, for several seconds each. None of them took so much as a step forward.

“Very well,” General Gau said. “We do this the hard way, then.”

“What will you do now, General?” asked Sorvalh.

“Simple,” Gau said. “I will call up each of you in turn. You will bow to me and swear your allegiance to me as the leader of the Conclave. Those of you who I know are truthful, I will offer you my thanks. The one of you who is a traitor, I will reveal you in front of those you have worked alongside for so long, and have you arrested. Your punishment will be severe. And it will be most definitely public. And it will end with your death.”

“This is not like you, General,” Sorvalh said. “You created the Conclave with the idea that there would be no dictators, no demands of personal allegiance. There is only allegiance to the Conclave. To its ideals.”

“The Conclave is near collapse, Hafte,” Gau said. “And you know as well as I do that Nerbros Eser and his sort will run the Conclave like a personal fiefdom. One among you has already decided that Eser’s dictatorship is preferable to a Conclave where every race has a voice. It’s clear to me that I must ask for the allegiance I once only held in trust. I am sorry it has come to this. But it has.”

“What if we will not swear allegiance?” Sorvalh said.

“Then you will be arrested as a traitor,” Gau said. “Along with the one who I know to be the assassin.”

“You are wrong to do this,” Sorvalh said. “You are going against your own vision for the Conclave to ask for this allegiance. I want you to know I believe this in my soul.”

"Noted," Gau said.

"Very well," Sorvalh said, and stepped forward to the platform and knelt. "General Tarsem Gau, I offer you my allegiance as the leader of the Conclave."

Gau looked at me. This was my cue. I shook my head at him, clearly enough that everyone in the room could see that he was waiting for my verification.

"Thank you, Hafte," Gau said. "You may step back. Wert Ninung, please step forward."

Ninung did. As did the next six advisors. There were three left.

I was beginning to get very nervous. Gau and I had already agreed that we would not carry the act so far as to accuse someone who wasn't actually guilty. But if we got to the end without a traitor, then we both would have a lot to answer for.

"Lernin Il," General Gau said. "Please step forward."

Il nodded and smoothly moved forward and when he got to me, viciously shoved me to the floor and lunged for the stone knife Gau had left on the table next to him. I hit the floor so hard I bounced my skull on it. I heard screaming and honks of alarm from the other advisors. I rolled and looked up as Il raised the knife and prepared to plunge it into the general.

The knife was left out and within easy reach for a reason. Gau had already said he intended to reveal the traitor; he said he knew without a doubt who it was; he said the punishment for the traitor would include death. The traitor would already be convinced he would have nothing to lose by attempting the assassination then and there. But Gau's advisors didn't usually carry around killing implements on their person; they were bureaucrats and didn't carry anything more dangerous than a writing stylus. But a nice sharp stone knife carelessly left lying around would be just the thing to convince a desperate would-be assassin to take a chance. This was also one reason why the general's guards (and Hickory and Dickory) were stationed at the perimeter of the room instead of near the general; we had to give the illusion to the assassin that he could get in a stab or two before the guards got him.

The general wasn't stupid, of course; he was wearing body armor that protected most of the parts of his body susceptible to stab wounds. But the general's head and neck were still vulnerable. The general thought it was worth the risk, but now as I watched the general trying to move to protect himself, I came to the conclusion that the weakest part of our plan was the one where the general presumably avoids being stabbed to death.

Il was bringing down the knife. None of the general's guards or Hickory or Dickory was going to get there in time. Hickory and Dickory had trained me how to disarm an opponent; the problem was I was on the ground and not in any position to block the knife blow. And anyway the Ghlagh were a Conclave race; I hadn't spent any time learning any of their weak points.

But then something occurred to me, as I lay there on my back, staring up at Il.

I may not know much about the Ghlagh, but I sure know what a *knee* looks like.

I braced myself on the floor, pushed, and drove the heel of my foot hard into the side of Lernin Il's most available knee. It gave way with a sickly twist and I thought I could feel something in his leg go *snap,* which made me feel sick. Il squealed in pain and grabbed at his leg, dropping the knife. I scrambled away as quickly as I could. General Gau launched himself out of his chair and took Il all the rest of the way down.

Hickory and Dickory were suddenly by me, dragging me off the riser. Gau shouted something to his guards, who were racing toward the general.

"His staff!" Gau said. "Stop his staff!"

I looked over to the bar and saw three Ghlagh lunging at their equipment. Il's people were clearly in on the assassination and were now trying to signal their conspirators that they'd been discovered. Gau's men skidded to a stop and reversed themselves, leaping over the bar to get at Il's staff. They knocked away their equipment, but not before at least one of them had gotten a message through. We knew that because all through the Conclave headquarters, alarms began stuttering to life.

The space station was under attack.

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About a minute after Il had made his clumsy attack on General Gau, an Impo battle cruiser named the *Farre* launched six missiles into the portion of the Conclave space station where Gau's offices were. The *Farre* was commanded by an Impo named Ealt Ruml. Ruml, it turns out, had reached an agreement with Nerbros Eser and Lernin Il to take command of a new Conclave fleet after Gau was assassinated. Ruml would then take the entire fleet to Phoenix Station, destroy it and start working down the list of human worlds. In exchange all Ruml had to do was be prepared to do a little flagrant bombing of Gau's offices and flagship when signaled, as part of a larger, orchestrated coup attempt, which would feature Gau's assassination as the main event and the destruction of key battle ships from races loyal to Gau.

When Gau revealed to his advisors that he knew one of them was a traitor, one of Il's staffers sent a coded message to Ruml, informing him that everything was about to go sideways. Ruml in turn sent coded messages of his own to three other battle cruisers near the Conclave station, each captained by someone Ruml had converted to the cause. All four ships began warming up their weapons systems and selecting targets: Ruml targeted Gau's offices while the other traitors targeted Gau's flagship *Gentle Star* and other craft.

If everything went as planned, Ruml and his conspirators would have disabled the ships most likely to come to Gau's aid—not that it would matter, because Ruml would have opened up Gau's offices to space, sucking anyone in them (including, at the time, me) into cold, airless vacuum. Minutes later, when Il's staff sent a confirmation note just before getting their equipment kicked out of their paws, Ruml launched his missiles and readied another set to go.

And was, I imagine, entirely surprised when the *Farre* was struck broadside almost simultaneously by three missiles fired from the *Gentle Star.* The *Star* and six other trusted ships had been put on alert by Gau to watch for any ships that began warming up their weapons systems. The *Star* had spotted the *Farre* warming up its missile batteries and had quietly targeted the ship and prepared its own defense.

Gau had forbidden any action until someone else's missiles flew, but the instant the *Farre* launched, the *Star* did the same, and then began antimissile defenses against the two missiles targeting it, sent by the Arrisian cruiser *Vut-Roy*.

The *Star* destroyed one of the missiles and took light damage from the second. The *Farre,* which had not been expecting a counterattack, took heavy damage from the *Star*'s missiles and even more damage when its engine ruptured, destroying half of the ship and killing hundreds on board, including Ealt Ruml and his bridge crew. Five of the six missiles fired by the *Farre* were disabled by the space station's defenses; the sixth hit the station, blowing a hole in the station compartment next to Gau's offices. The station's system of airtight doors sealed off the damage in minutes; forty-four people were killed.

All of this happened in the space of less than two minutes, because the battle happened at incredibly close range. Unlike space battles in entertainment shows, real battles between spaceships take place over huge distances. In this battle, however, all the ships were in orbit around the station. Some of the ships involved were just a few klicks away from each other. That's pretty much the starship equivalent of going after each other with knives.

Or so I'm told. I'm going by what others tell me of the battle, because at the time what *I* was doing was being dragged out of General Gau's advisor chamber by Hickory and Dickory. The last thing I saw was Gau pinning down Lernin Il while at the same time trying to keep his other advisors from beating the living crap out of him. There was too much noise for my translation device to work anymore, but I suspected that Gau was trying to tell the rest of them that he needed Il alive. What can you say. No one likes a traitor.

I'm also told that the battle outside of the space station would have gone on longer than it did except that shortly after the first salvo of missiles a funny thing happened: An Obin cruiser skipped into existence unsettlingly close to the Conclave space station, setting off a series of proximity alarms to go with the attack alarms already in progress. That was unusual, but what *really* got everyone's attention

was the *other* ships that appeared about thirty seconds afterward. It took the station a few minutes to identify these.

And at that point everyone who had been fighting each other realized they now had something bigger to worry about.

I didn't know about any of this right away. Hickory and Dickory had dragged me to the conference room some distance away from the advisor chamber and were keeping it secure when the alarms suddenly stopped.

"Well, I finally used that training," I said, to Hickory. I was amped up on leftover adrenaline from the assassination attempt and paced up and down in the room. Hickory said nothing to this and continued to scan the corridor for threats. I sighed and waited until it signaled that it was safe to move.

Ten minutes later, Hickory clicked something to Dickory, who went to the door. Hickory went into the corridor and out of sight. Shortly after that I heard what sounded like Hickory arguing with someone. Hickory returned, followed by six very serious-looking guards and General Gau.

"What happened?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

"What do you have to do with the Consu?" General Gau asked me, ignoring my question.

"The Consu?" I said. "Nothing. I had asked the Obin to try to contact them on my behalf, to see if they could help me save Roanoke. That was a few days ago. I haven't heard from the Obin about it since."

"I think you have an answer," Gau said. "They're here. And they're asking to see you."

"There's a Consu ship here now?" I said.

"Actually, the Consu asking for you is on an Obin ship," Gau said. "Which doesn't make any sense to me at all, but never mind that. There were Consu ships following the Obin ship."

"Ships," I said. "How many?"

"So far?" Gau said. "About six hundred."

"Excuse me?" I said. My adrenaline spiked again.

"There are still more coming in," Gau said. "Please don't take this the wrong way, Zoë, but if you've done something to anger the Consu, I hope they choose to take it out on you, not us."

I turned and looked at Hickory, disbelieving.
“You said you required help,” Hickory said.

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TWENTY-FOUR

I entered the storage deck of the other Obin ship.

"So this is the human who has an entire race to do her bidding," said the Consu waiting there for me. It was the only place on the Obin ship where he would fit, I guessed.

I smiled in spite of myself.

"You laugh at me," the Consu said. It spoke perfect English, and in a light, gentle voice, which was weird considering how much it looked like a large and savagely angry insect.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's just that it's the second time in a day that someone's said that to me."

"Well," the Consu said. It unfolded itself in a way that made me want to run screaming in the other direction, and from somewhere inside its body a creepily humanlike arm and hand beckoned to me. "Come and let me get a look at you."

I took one step forward and then had a very difficult time with the next step.

"You asked for me, human," the Consu said.

I developed a spine and walked over to the Consu. It touched and prodded me with its smaller arms, while its giant slashing arms, the ones the Consu used to decapitate enemies in combat, hovered on either side of me, at just about head level. I managed not to completely lose it.

"Yes, well," the Consu said, and I heard something like disappointment in its voice. "There's nothing particularly *special* about

you, is there? Physically. Is there something special about you mentally?"

"No," I said. "I'm just me."

"We're all just ourselves," the Consu said, and folded itself back into its self, much to my relief. "That is axiomatic. What is it about you that makes hundreds of Obin allow themselves to die to get to me, is what I am asking."

I felt sick again. "You said that hundreds of Obin died to bring you to me?"

"Oh, yes," the Consu said. "Your pets surrounded my ship with their own and tried to board it. The ship killed everyone that tried. They remained persistent and finally I became curious. I allowed one to board the ship and it told me that you had demanded the Obin convince the Consu to help you. I wanted to see for myself what sort of creature could so casually demand this, and could cause the Obin to fulfill it at such a cost to themselves."

It looked at me again curiously. "You appear upset," it said.

"I'm thinking about the Obin who died," I said.

"They did what you asked of them," the Consu said, with a bored tone.

"You didn't have to kill so many of them," I said.

"Your pets didn't have to offer up so many to sacrifice," said the Consu. "And yet they did. You seem stupid so I will explain this to you. Your pets, to the extent that they can think, did this intelligently. The Consu will not speak to the Obin for their own behalf. We answered their questions long ago and it does not interest us to speak further on the subject."

"But *you* spoke to the Obin," I said.

"I am dying," the Consu said. "I am on"—and here the Consu made a noise that sounded like a tractor falling down a hill—"the death journey that Consu prepared to move forward are permitted if in this life they have proven worthy. Consu on this journey may do as they please, including speaking to proscribed creatures, and may if asked appropriately grant a final boon. Your pets have spied on the Consu for decades—we were aware of this but did nothing about it—and knew the route of the death journey and knew the ceremonial ships those on

the journey travel in. Your pets understood this was the only way they could talk to us. And your pets knew what it would require to interest me or any Consu enough to hear them. You should have known this when you made your demand."

"I didn't," I said.

"Then you are foolish, human," the Consu said. "If I were inclined to feel sorry for the Obin, I would do so because they had wasted their effort and diverted me from my journey on the behalf of someone so ignorant of the cost. But I do not feel sorry for them. They at least knew the cost, and willingly paid it. Now. You will either tell me how you demand I help you, or I will go and your pets' deaths will have truly been for nothing."

"I need help to save my colony," I said, and forced myself to focus. "My friends and family are there and are under threat of attack. It is a small colony and not able to defend itself. The Colonial Union will not help us. The Obin are not allowed to help us. The Consu have technology that could help us. I ask for your help."

"You said 'ask,' " the Consu said. "Your pets said 'demand.' "

"I demanded help from the Obin because I knew I could," I said. "I am asking you."

"I do not care about your colony or you," the Consu said.

"You just said that as part of your death journey you can grant a boon," I said. "This could be it."

"It may be that my boon was to the Obin, in speaking to you," the Consu said.

I blinked at this. "How would it be a boon to them just to speak to me if you won't at least think of helping me?" I said. "Then it would be you who wasted their sacrifice and effort."

"That is my choice," the Consu said. "The Obin understood that in making the sacrifice the answer might be 'no.' This is another thing they understand that you don't."

"I know there is a lot I don't understand here," I said. "I can see that. I'm sorry. But I still need help for my family and friends."

"How many family and friends?" the Consu said.

"My colony has twenty-five hundred people," I said.

"A similar number of Obin died in order to bring me here," the Consu said.

"I didn't know that would happen," I said. "I wouldn't have asked for that."

"Is that so?" the Consu said. It shifted its bulk and drew in toward me. I didn't back away. "I don't believe you, human. You are foolish and you are ignorant, that much is clear. Yet I cannot believe that even you did not understand what you were asking the Obin for when you asked them to come to us for your sake. You demanded help from the Obin because you could. And because you could you did not ask the cost. But you had to have known the cost would be high."

I didn't know what to say to that.

The Consu drew back and seemed to regard me, like it might an amusing insect. "Your capriciousness and callousness with the Obin interests me," it said. "And so does the fact that the Obin are willing to give of themselves for your whims despite your lack of care for them."

I said something I knew I was going to regret, but I couldn't help myself. The Consu was doing a really excellent job of pushing my buttons. "That's a funny thing coming from someone from the race that gave the Obin intelligence but no consciousness," I said. "As long as we're talking about capriciousness and callousness."

"Ah. Yes, that's right," the Consu said. "The Obin told me this. You're the child of the human who made the machines that let the Obin play at consciousness."

"They don't play at it," I said. "They *have* it."

"And it is a terrible thing that they do," the Consu said. "Consciousness is a tragedy. It leads the whole race away from perfection, causes it to fritter its efforts on individual and wasteful effort. Our lives as Consu are spent learning to free our race from the tyranny of self, to move beyond ourselves and in doing so move our race forward. It is why we help you lesser races along, so you may also free yourselves in time."

I bit my cheek at this bit. The Consu would sometimes come down to a human colony, wipe it and everyone in it off the face of their planet, and then wait for the Colonial Defense Forces to come and fight

them. It was a game to the Consu, as far as any of us could see. To say that they were doing it for our benefit was perverse, to say the least.

But I was here to ask for help, not debate morals. I had already been baited once. I didn't dare let it happen again.

The Consu continued, oblivious to my personal struggles. "What you humans have done to the Obin makes a mockery of their potential," it said. "We created the Obin to be the best among us all, the one race without consciousness, the one race free to pursue its destiny as a race from its first steps. The Obin were meant to be what we aspired to. To see them aspire to consciousness is to see a creature that can fly aspire to wallow in mud. Your father did the Obin no favors, human, in hobbling them with consciousness."

I stood there for a minute, amazed that this Consu would tell me, in seemingly casual conversation, things that the Obin had sacrificed half their number for so many years ago but were never allowed to hear. The Consu waited patiently for my response. "The Obin would disagree," I said. "And so would I."

"Of course you would," the Consu said. "Their love of their consciousness is what makes them willing to do the ridiculous for you. That and the fact that they choose to honor you for something that your father did, even though you had no hand in it. This blindness and honor is convenient to you. It is what you use to get them to do what you want. You don't prize their consciousness for what it gives them. You prize it for what it allows you to do to them."

"That's not true," I said.

"Indeed," said the Consu, and I could hear the mocking tone in its voice. It shifted its weight again. "Very well, human. You have asked me to help you. Perhaps I will. I can provide you with a boon, one the Consu may not refuse. But this boon is not free. It comes with a cost attached."

"What cost?" I said.

"I want to be entertained first," the Consu said. "So I offer you this bargain. You have among you several hundred Obin. Select one hundred of them in any way you choose. I will ask the Consu to send one hundred of our own—convicts, sinners, and others who have

strayed from the path and would be willing to attempt redemption. We will set them at each other, to the death.

"In the end, one side will have a victory. If it is yours, then I will help you. If it is mine, I will not. And then, having been sufficiently amused, I will be on my way, to continue my death journey. I will call to the Consu now. Let us say that in eight of your hours we will start this entertainment. I trust that will be enough time for you to prepare your pets."

"We will have no problem finding a hundred volunteers among the Obin," Dock said to me. It and I were in the conference room General Gau had lent me. Hickory and Dickory stood outside the door to make sure we weren't disturbed. "I will have the volunteers ready for you within the hour."

"Why didn't you tell me how the Obin planned to get the Consu to me?" I asked. "The Consu here told me that hundreds of Obin died to get him here. Why didn't you warn me that would happen?"

"I did not know how we would choose to try to get the Consu's attention," Dock said. "I sent along your requirement, along with my own assent. I was not a participant in making the choice."

"But you knew this could happen," I said.

"As a member of the Council I know that we have had the Consu under observation, and that there had been plans to find ways to talk to them again," Dock said. "I knew this was one of them."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I said.

"I told you that attempting to speak to the Consu would come at a high cost," Dock said. "This was the cost. At the time, the cost did not seem too high for you."

"I didn't know that it would mean that hundreds of Obin would *die*," I said. "Or that they would just keep throwing themselves into a Consu firing line until the Consu got curious enough to stop. If I had known I would have asked you to try something else."

"Given what you required us to do and the time in which we had to do it, there was nothing else," Dock said. It came to me and opened up its hands, like it was trying to make me see something important.

"Please understand, Zoë. We had been planning to petition a Consu on its death journey for a long time now, and for our own reasons. It was one of the reasons we were able to fulfill your requirement at all. Everything was already in place."

"But it was my order that killed them," I said.

"It is not your fault that the Consu required their deaths," Dock said. "The Obin who were part of the mission had already known what was required to get the attention of the Consu. They were already committed to this task. Your request changed only the timing and the purpose of their mission. But those who participated did so willingly, and understood the reason for doing it. It was their choice."

"They still did it because I didn't think about what I was asking," I said.

"They did it because you required our help," Dock said. "They would have thought it an honor to do this for you. Just as those who will fight for you now will consider it an honor."

I looked at my hands, ashamed to look at Dock. "You said that you had already been planning to petition a Consu on its death journey," I said. "What were you going to ask?"

"For understanding," Dock said. "To know why the Consu kept consciousness away from us. To know why they chose to punish us with its lack."

I looked up at that. "I know the answer," I said, and told Dock what the Consu had told me about consciousness and why they chose not to give it to the Obin. "I don't know if that was the answer you were looking for," I said. "But that's what this Consu told me."

Dock didn't say anything. I looked more closely at it, and I could see it was trembling. "Hey," I said, and got up from my chair. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"I am not upset," Dock said. "I am happy. You have given us answers to questions we have been asking since as long as our race has existed. Answers the Consu would not have given us themselves. Answers many of us would have given our lives for."

"Many of you *did* give your lives for them," I said.

"No," Dock said. "They gave their lives to help *you*. There was no expectation of any compensation for the sacrifice. They did it because

you required it. You did not have to give us anything in return. But you have given us this."

"You're welcome," I said. I was getting embarrassed. "It's not a big thing. The Consu just told me. I just thought you should know."

"Consider, Zoë, that this thing that you just thought we should know was something that others would have seen as something to hold over us," Dock said. "That they would have sold to us, or denied to us. You gave it freely."

"After I told you that I required your help and sent hundreds of Obin out to die," I said, and sat back down. "Don't make me out to be a hero, Dock. It's not the way I feel right now."

"I am sorry, Zoë," Dock said. "But if you will not be a hero, at least know that you are not a villain. You are our friend."

"Thank you, Dock," I said. "That helps a little."

Dock nodded. "Now I must go to find the hundred volunteers you seek," it said, "and to tell the Council what you have shared with me. Do not worry, Zoë. We will not disappoint you."

"This is what I have for you on short notice," General Gau said. He swept an arm through the space station's immense cargo bay. "This part of the station is just newly constructed. We haven't actually used it for cargo yet. I think it'll suit your purposes."

I stared at the immensity of the space. "I think so," I said. "Thank you, General."

"It's the least I could do," General Gau said. "Considering how you've helped me just recently."

"Thank you for not holding the Consu invasion against me," I said.

"On the contrary, it's been a benefit," Gau said. "It stopped the battle around the space station before it could get truly horrific. The traitor crews assumed I had called those ships for assistance. They surrendered before I could correct the impression. You helped me quash the rebellion before it could get started."

"You're welcome," I said.

"Thank you," said Gau. "Now, of course, I would like them to go away. But it's my understanding that they're here to make sure we

don't do anything foolish with our Consu guest while he's here. The ships are fighter drones, not even manned, but this is Consu technology. I don't imagine if they opened fire on us we'd stand much of a chance. So we have an enforced peace here at the moment. Since it works for me, not against me, I shouldn't complain."

"Have you found out any more about Nerbros Eser and what his plans are?" I asked. I didn't feel like thinking about the Consu anymore.

"Yes," Gau said. "Lernin has been quite forthcoming now that he's trying to avoid being executed for treason. It's been a wonderful motivator. He tells me that Eser plans to take Roanoke with a small force of soldiers. The idea there is to show that he can take with a hundred soldiers what I couldn't take with four hundred battle cruisers. But 'take' is the wrong word for it, I'm afraid. Eser plans to destroy the colony and everyone in it."

"That was your plan too," I reminded the general.

He bobbed his head in what I assumed was an acknowledgment. "You know by now, I hope, that I would have much preferred not to have killed the colonists," he said. "Eser does not intend to offer that option."

I skipped over that piece of data in my head. "When will he attack?" I asked.

"Soon, I think," Gau said. "Lernin doesn't think Eser has assembled his troops yet, but this failed assassination attempt is going to force him to move sooner than later."

"Great," I said.

"There's still time," Gau said. "Don't give up hope yet, Zoë."

"I haven't," I said. "But I've still got a lot on my mind."

"Have you found enough volunteers?" Gau asked.

"We have," I said, and my face tightened up as I said it.

"What's wrong?" Gau said.

"One of the volunteers," I said, and stopped. I tried again. "One of the volunteers is an Obin named Dickory," I said. "My friend and my bodyguard. When it volunteered I told it no. Demanded that it take back its offer. But it refused."

"Having it volunteer could be a powerful thing," Gau said. "It probably encouraged others to step forward."

I nodded. "But Dickory is still my friend," I said. "Still my family. Maybe it shouldn't make a difference but it does."

"Of course it makes a difference," Gau said. "The reason you're here is to try to keep the people you love from being hurt."

"I'm asking people I don't know to sacrifice themselves for people I do," I said.

"That's why you're asking them to volunteer," Gau said. "But it seems to me the reason they're volunteering is for you."

I nodded and looked out at the bay, and imagined the fight that was coming.

"I have a proposition for you," the Consu said to me.

The two of us sat in the operations room of the cargo bay, ten meters above the floor of the bay. On the floor were two groups of beings. In the first group were the one hundred Obin who had volunteered to fight for me. In the other group were the one hundred Consu criminals, who would be forced to fight the Obin for a chance to regain their honor. The Consu looked scary big next to the Obin. The contest would be modified hand-to-hand combat: The Obin were allowed a combat knife, while the Consu, with their slashing arms, would fight bare-handed, if you called being able to wield two razor-sharp limbs attached to your own body "bare-handed."

I was getting very nervous about the Obin's chances.

"A proposition," the Consu repeated.

I glanced over at the Consu, who in himself nearly filled the operations room. He'd been there when I had come up; I wasn't entirely sure how he'd gotten himself through the door. The two of us were there with Hickory and Dock and General Gau, who had taken it upon himself to act as the official arbiter for the contest.

Dickory was on the floor. Getting ready to fight.

"Are you interested in hearing it?" the Consu asked.

"We're about to start," I said.

"It's about the contest," the Consu said. "I have a way that you can get what you want without having the contest at all."

I closed my eyes. "Tell me," I said.

"I will help you keep your colony safe by providing you a piece of our technology," the Consu said. "A machine that produces an energy field that robs projectiles of their momentum. A sapper field. It makes your bullets fall out of the air and sucks the power from missiles before they strike their targets. If you are clever your colony can use it to defeat those who attack it. This is what I am allowed and prepared to give to you."

"And what do you want in return?" I asked.

"A simple demonstration," the Consu said. It unfolded and pointed toward the Obin on the floor. "A demand from you was enough to cause hundreds of Obin to willingly sacrifice themselves for the mere purpose of getting my attention. This power you have interests me. I want to see it. Tell this one hundred to sacrifice themselves here and now, and I will give you what you need in order to save your colony."

"I can't do that," I said.

"It is not an issue of whether it is possible," the Consu said. It leaned its bulk over and then addressed Dock. "Would the Obin here kill themselves if this human asked it?"

"Without doubt," Dock said.

"They would not hesitate," the Consu said.

"No," Dock said.

The Consu turned back to me. "Then all you need to do is give the order."

"No," I said.

"Don't be stupid, human," the Consu said. "You have been assured by me that I will assist you. You have been assured by this Obin that your pets here will gladly sacrifice themselves for your benefit, without delay or complaint. You will be assured of helping your family and friends survive imminent attack. And you have done it before. You thought nothing of sending hundred to their death to speak to me. It should not be a difficult decision now."

He waved again toward the floor. "Tell me honestly, human. Look at your pets, and then look at the Consu. Do you think your pets will

be the ones left standing when this is over? Do you want to risk the safety of your friends and family on them?

"I offer you an alternative. It carries no risk. It costs you nothing but your assent. Your pets will not object. They will be happy to do this for you. Simply say that you require this of them. That you demand it of them. And if it makes you feel any better, you can tell them to turn off their consciousness before they kill themselves. Then they will not fear their sacrifice. They will simply do it. They will do it for you. They will do it for what you are to them."

I considered what the Consu had said.

I turned to Dock. "You have no doubt that those Obin would do this for me," I said.

"There is no doubt," Dock said. "They are there to fight at your request, Zoë. They know they may die. They have already accepted that possibility, just as the Obin who sacrificed themselves to bring you this Consu knew what was required of them."

"And what about you," I said to Hickory. "Your friend and partner is down there, Hickory. For ten years, at least, you've spent your life with Dickory. What do you say?"

Hickory's trembling was so slight that I almost doubted that I saw it. "Dickory will do as you ask, Zoë," Hickory said. "You should know this already." It turned away after that.

I looked at General Gau. "I have no advice to offer you," he said. "But I am very interested to find out what you choose."

I closed my eyes and I thought of my family. Of John and Jane. Of Savitri, who traveled to a new world with us. I thought of Gretchen and Magdy and the future they could have together. I thought of Enzo and his family and everything that was taken from them. I thought of Roanoke, my home.

And I knew what I had to do.

I opened my eyes.

"The choice is obvious," the Consu said.

I looked at the Consu and nodded. "I think you're right," I said. "And I think I need to go down and tell them."

I walked to the door of the operations room. As I did, General Gau lightly took my arm.

"Think about what you're doing, Zoë," Gau said. "Your choice here matters."

I looked up at the general. "I know it does," I said. "And it's my choice to make."

The general let go of my arm. "Do what you have to do," he said.

"Thank you," I said. "I think I will."

I left the room and for the next minute tried very hard not to fall down the stairs as I walked down them. I'm happy to say I succeeded. But it was a close thing.

I walked toward the group of Obin, who were milling about, some doing exercises, some talking quietly to another or to a small group. As I got closer I tried to locate Dickory and could not. There were too many Obin, and Dickory wasn't somewhere I could easily see him.

Eventually the Obin noticed I was walking to them. They quieted and equally quietly formed ranks.

I stood there in front of them for a few seconds, trying to see each of the Obin for itself, and not just one of a hundred. I opened my mouth to speak. Nothing would come. My mouth was so dry I could not make words. I closed my mouth, swallowed a couple of times, and tried again.

"You know who I am," I said. "I'm pretty sure about that. I only know one of you personally, and I'm sorry about that. I wish I could have known each of you, before you were asked . . . before *I* asked . . ."

I stopped. I was saying stupid things. It wasn't what I wanted to do. Not now.

"Look," I said. "I'm going to tell you some things, and I can't promise it's going to make any kind of sense. But I need to say them to you before . . ." I gestured at the cargo bay. "Before all of *this*."

The Obin all looked at me, whether politely or patiently, I can't say.

"You know why you're here," I said. "You're here to fight those Consu over there because I want to try to protect my family and friends on Roanoke. You were told that if you could beat the Consu, I would get the help I needed. But something's changed."

I pointed up to the operations room. "There's a Consu up there," I said, "who tells me that he'll give me what I need to save Roanoke without having to have you fight, and risk losing. All I have to do is tell

you to take those knives you were going to use on those Consu, and use them on yourselves. All I have to do is to tell you to kill yourselves. Everyone tells me you'll do it, because of what I am to you.

"And they're right. I'm pretty sure about that, too. I'm certain that if I asked all of you to kill yourselves, you would do it. Because I am your Zoë. Because you've seen me all your lives in the recordings that Hickory and Dickory have made. Because I'm standing here in front of you now, asking you to do it.

"I know you would do this for me. You would."

I stopped for a minute, tried to focus.

And then I faced something I'd spent a long time avoiding.

My own past.

I raised my head again and looked directly at the Obin.

"When I was five, I lived on a space station. Covell. I lived there with my father. One day while he was away from the station for a few days on business, the station was attacked. First by the Rraey. They attacked, and they came in and they rounded up all the people who lived on the station, and they began to kill us. I remember . . ."

I closed my eyes again.

"I remember husbands being taken from their wives and then shot in the halls where everyone could hear," I said. "I remember parents begging the Rraey to spare their children. I remember being pushed behind a stranger when the woman who was watching me, the mother of a friend, was taken away. She tried to push away her daughter, too, but she held on to her mother and they were both taken away. If the Rraey had continued much longer, eventually they would have found me and killed me too."

I opened my eyes. "But then the Obin attacked the station, to take it from the Rraey, who weren't prepared for another fight. And when they cleared the station of the Rraey, they took those of us humans who were left and put us in a common area. I remember being there, with no one looking after me. My father was gone. My friend and her mother were dead. I was alone.

"The space station was a science station, so the Obin looked through the research and they found my father's work. His work on consciousness. And they wanted him to work for them. So they came

back to us in the common area and they called out my father's name. But he wasn't on the station. They called his name again and I answered. I said I was his daughter and that he would come for me soon.

"I remember the Obin talking among themselves then, and then telling me to come away. And I remember saying no, because I didn't want to leave the other humans. And I remember what one of the Obin said to me then. It said, 'You must come with us. You have been chosen, and you will be safe.'

"And I remembered everything that had just happened. And I think even at five years old some part of me knew what would happen to the rest of the people at Covell. And here was the Obin, telling me I would be safe. Because I had been chosen. And I remember taking the Obin's hand, being led away and looking back at the humans who were left. And then they were gone. I never saw them again.

"But *I* lived," I said. "Not because of who I was; I was just this little girl. But because of *what* I was: the daughter of the man who could give you consciousness. It was the first time that what I was mattered more than who I was. But it wasn't the last."

I looked up at the operations room, trying to see if those in there were listening to me, and wondering what they were thinking. Wondering what Hickory was thinking. And General Gau. I turned back to the Obin.

"What I am *still* matters more than who I am," I said. "It matters more right now. Right this minute. Because of what I am, hundreds of you died to bring just one Consu to see me. Because of what I am, if I ask you to take those knives and plunge them into your bodies, you will do it. Because of what I am. Because of what I have been to you."

I shook my head and looked down at the ground. "All my life I have accepted that what I am matters," I said. "That I had to work with it. Make accommodations for it. Sometimes I thought I could manipulate it, although I just found out the price for that belief. Sometimes I would even fight against it. But *never once* did I think that I could leave what I was behind. Because I remembered what it got me. How it saved me. I never even thought of giving it up."

I pointed up at the operations room. "There is a Consu in that operations room who wants me to kill you all, just to show him that I can. He wants me to do it to make a point to me, too—that when it comes down to it, I'm willing to sacrifice all of you to get what I want. Because when it comes down to it, you don't matter. You're just something I can use, a means to an end, a tool for another purpose. He wants me to kill you to rub my face in the fact I don't care.

"And he's right."

I looked into the faces of the Obin. "I don't know any of you, except for one," I said. "I won't remember what any of you look like in a few days, no matter what happens here. On the other hand all the people I love and care for I can see as soon as I close my eyes. Their faces are so clear to me. Like they are here with me. Because they are. I carry them inside me. Like you carry those you care for inside of you.

"The Consu is right that it would be easy to ask you to sacrifice yourselves for me. To tell you to do it so I can save my family and my friends. He's right because I know you would do it without a second thought. You would be happy to do it because it would make *me* happy—because what I am matters to you. He knows that knowing this will make me feel less guilty for asking you.

"And he's right again. He's right about me. I admit it. And I'm sorry."

I stopped again, and took another moment to pull myself together. I wiped my face.

This was going to be the hard part.

"The Consu is right," I said. "But he doesn't know the one thing about me that matters right now. And that it is that I am *tired* of being what I am. I am tired of having been chosen. I don't want to be the one you sacrifice yourself for, because of whose daughter I am or because you accept that I can make demands of you. I don't want that from you. And I don't want you to die for me.

"So forget it. Forget all of this. I release you of your obligation to me. Of any obligation to me. Thank you for volunteering, but you shouldn't have to fight for me. I shouldn't have asked.

"You have already done so much for me. You have brought me here so I could deliver a message to General Gau. He's told me about the

plans against Roanoke. It should be enough for us to defend ourselves. I can't ask you for anything else. I certainly can't ask you to fight these Consu and possibly die. I want you to live instead.

"I am done being *what* I am. From now on I'm just *who* I am. And who I am is Zoë. Just Zoë. Someone who has no claim on you. Who doesn't require or demand anything from you. And who wants you to be able to make your own choices, not have them made for you. Especially not by me.

"And that's all I have to say."

The Obin stood in front of me, silently, and after a minute I realized that I didn't really know why I was expecting a response. And then for a crazy moment I wondered if they actually even understood me. Hickory and Dickory spoke my language, and I just assumed all the other Obin would, too. That was a pretty arrogant assumption, I realized.

So I sort of nodded and turned to go, back up to the operations room, where God only knew what I was going to say to that Consu.

And then I heard singing.

A single voice, from somewhere in the middle of the pack of Obin. It took up the first words of "Delhi Morning." And though that was the part I always sang, I had no trouble recognizing the voice.

It was Dickory.

I turned and faced the Obin just as a second voice took up the counterpoint, and then another voice came in, and another and another, and soon all one hundred of the Obin were singing, creating a version of the song that was so unlike any I had heard before, so magnificent, that all I could do was stand there and soak in it, let it wash around me, and let it move through me.

It was one of those moments that you just can't describe. So I won't try anymore.

But I can say I was impressed. These Obin would have known of "Delhi Morning" for only a few weeks. For them to not only know the song but to perform it flawlessly was nothing short of amazing.

I had to get these guys for the next hootenanny.

When it was done, all I could do was put my hands to my face and say "Thank you" to the Obin. And then Dickory came through the

ranks to stand in front of me.

"Hey, you," I said to Dickory.

"Zoë Boutin-Perry," said Dickory. "I am Dickory."

I almost said, *I know that*, but Dickory kept speaking.

"I have known you since you were a child," it said. "I have watched you grow and learn and experience life, and through you have learned to experience life myself. I have always known what you are. I tell you truthfully that it is *who* you are that has mattered to me, and always has.

"It is to you, Zoë Boutin-Perry, that I offer to fight for your family and for Roanoke. I do this not because you have demanded it or required it but because I care for you, and always have. You would honor me if you would accept my assistance." Dickory bowed, which was a very interesting thing on an Obin.

Here was irony: This was the most I had heard Dickory say, *ever*, and I couldn't think of anything to say in return.

So I just said, "Thank you, Dickory. I accept." Dickory bowed again and returned to ranks.

Another Obin stepped forward and stood before me. "I am Strike," it said. "We have not met before. I have watched you grow through all that Hickory and Dickory have shared with all Obin. I too have always known what you are. What I have learned from you, however, comes from who you are. It is an honor to have met you. It will be an honor to fight for you, your family, and for Roanoke. I offer my assistance to you, Zoë Boutin-Perry, freely and without reservation." Strike bowed.

"Thank you, Strike," I said. "I accept." And then I impulsively hugged Strike. It actually squeaked in surprise. We unhugged, Strike bowed again, and then returned to ranks just as another Obin came forward.

And another. And another.

It took a long time to hear each greeting and offer of assistance, and to accept each offer. I can honestly say there was never time better spent. When it was done I stood in front of one hundred Obin again—this time, each a friend. And I bowed my head to them and wished them well, and told them I would see them after.

Then I headed back toward the operations room. General Gau was at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for me.

"I have a position for you on my staff, Zoë, if you ever want it," he said.

I laughed. "I just want to go home, General. Thank you all the same."

"Some other time, then," Gau said. "Now I'm going to preside over this contest. I will be impartial when I'm observing it. But you should know that inside I'm rooting for the Obin. And that's something I never thought I would say."

"I do appreciate it," I said, and headed up the stairs.

Hickory met me at the door. "You did what I hoped you would do," Hickory said. "I regret not volunteering myself."

"I don't," I said, and hugged Hickory. Dock bowed to me; I nodded back. And then I approached the Consu.

"You have my answer," I said.

"So I have," the Consu said. "And it surprises me, human."

"Good," I said. "And the name is Zoë. Zoë Boutin-Perry."

"Indeed," the Consu said. He sounded amused at my cheekiness. "I will remember the name. And have others remember it as well. Although if your Obin do not win this contest, I do not imagine we will have to remember your name for long."

"You'll remember it for a long time," I said. "Because my friends down there are about to clean your clock."

And they did.

It wasn't even close.

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TWENTY-FIVE

And so I went home, Consu gift in tow.

John and Jane greeted me as I jumped off the Obin shuttle, all of us ending in a pile as I ran into Mom full speed and then we dragged Dad down with us. Then I showed them my new toy: the sapper field generator, specially designed by the Consu to give us a tactical advantage when Nerbros Eser and his friends came to call. Jane immediately took to it and started fiddling with it; that was her thing.

Hickory and Dickory and I decided that in the end neither John nor Jane needed to know what it took for us to get it. The less they knew, the less the Colonial Union could charge them with at their treason trial. Although it looked like that might not happen—the Roanoke council did remove John and Jane from their posts once they revealed where they had sent me and who I was supposed to see, and had appointed Gretchen's dad Manfred in their place. But they had given Mom and Dad ten days to hear back from me before they informed the Colonial Union about what they'd done. I got back just under the wire and once they saw what I brought, weren't inclined to offer my parents to the tender affections of the Colonial Union judicial system. I wasn't going to complain about that.

After I got Mom and Dad acquainted with the sapper field generator, I went for a walk and found Gretchen, reading a book on her porch.

"I'm back," I said.

"Oh," she said, casually flipping a page. "Were you gone?"

I grinned; she hurled the book at me and told me that if I ever did anything like that again, she would strangle me, and that she could do it because she always was better in our defense courses than I was. Well, it was true. She was. Then we hugged and made up and went to find Magdy, so we could pester him in stereo.

Ten days later, Roanoke was attacked by Nerbros Eser and about a hundred Arrisian soldiers, that being Eser's race. Eser and his soldiers marched right into Croatoan and demanded to speak to its leaders. They got Savitri, the administrative assistant, instead; she suggested that they go back to their ships and pretend their invasion never happened. Eser ordered his soldier to shoot Savitri, and that's when they learned how a sapper field can really mess with their weapons. Jane tuned the field so that it would slow down bullets but not slower projectiles. Which is why the Arrisian soldier's rifles wouldn't work, but Jane's flame thrower would. As did Dad's hunting bow. And Hickory's and Dickory's knives. And Manfred Trujillo's lorry. And so on.

At the end of it Nerbros Eser had none of the soldiers that he'd landed with, and was also surprised to learn that the battleship he'd parked in orbit wasn't there anymore, either. To be fair, the sapper field didn't extend into space; we got a little help there from a benefactor who wished to remain anonymous. But however you sliced it, Nerbros Eser's play for the leadership of the Conclave came to a very sad and embarrassing end.

Where was I in all of this? Why, safely squirreled away in a bomb shelter with Gretchen and Magdy and a bunch of other teenagers, that's where. Despite all the events of the previous month, or maybe because of them, the executive decision was made that I had had enough excitement for the time being. I can't say I disagreed with the decision. To be honest about it, I was looking forward to just getting back to my life on Roanoke with my friends, with nothing to worry about except for school and practicing for the next hootenanny. That was right about my speed.

But then General Gau came for a visit.

He was there to take custody of Nerbros Eser, which he did, to his great personal satisfaction. But he was also there for two other reasons.

The first was to inform the citizens of Roanoke that he had made it a standing order that no Conclave member was ever to attack our colony, and that he had made it clear to non-Conclave races in our part of space that if any of them were to get it into their heads to make a play for our little planet, that he would personally be very disappointed. He left unsaid what level of retaliation "personal disappointment" warranted. It was more effective that way.

Roanokers were of two minds about this. On the one hand, Roanoke was now practically free from attack. On the other hand, General Gau's declaration only brought home the fact that the Colonial Union itself hadn't done much for Roanoke, not just lately but ever. The general feeling was that the Colonial Union had a lot to answer for, and until it answered for these things, that Roanokers felt perfectly justified in not paying too close attention to the Colonial Union's dictates. Like, for example, the one in which Manfred Trujillo was supposed to arrest my parents and take them into custody on the charge of treason. Trujillo apparently had a hard time finding either John or Jane after that one came in. A neat trick, considering how often they were talking.

But this folded into the other reason Gau had come around.

"General Gau is offering us sanctuary," Dad said to me. "He knows your mom and I will be charged with treason—several counts seem likely—and it's not entirely out of the realm of possibility that you'll be charged as well."

"Well, I *did* commit treason," I said. "What with consorting with the leader of the Conclave and all."

Dad ignored this. "The point is, even if people here aren't in a rush to turn us in, it's only a matter of time before the CU sends real enforcement to come get us. We can't ask the people here to get into any more trouble on our account. We have to go, Zoë."

"When?" I asked.

"In the next day," Dad said. "Gau's ship is here now, but it's not like the CU is going to ignore it for long."

"So we're going to become citizens of the Conclave," I said.

"I don't think so," Dad said. "We'll be among them for a while, yes. But I have a plan to get us somewhere I think you might be happy

with."

"And where is that?" I asked.

"Well," Dad said. "Have you ever heard of this little place called Earth?"

Dad and I spoke for a few more minutes, and then I walked over to Gretchen's, where I actually managed to say hello to her before I broke down in sobs. She gave me a hug and held me, and let me know it was okay. "I knew this was coming," she said to me. "You don't do what you've done and then come back and pretend nothing has happened."

"I thought it might be worth a try," I said.

"That's because you're an idiot," Gretchen said. I laughed. "You're an idiot, and my sister, and I love you, Zoë."

We hugged some more. And then she came over to my house and helped me and my family pack away our lives for a hasty exit.

Word spread, as it would in a small colony. Friends came by, mine and my parents', by themselves and in twos and threes. We hugged and laughed and cried and said our good-byes and tried to part well. As the sun started to set Magdy came by, and he and Gretchen and I took a walk to the Gugino homestead, where I knelt and kissed Enzo's headstone, and said good-bye to him one last time, even as I carried him still in my heart. We walked home and Magdy said his good-bye then, giving me a hug so fierce that I thought it would crack my ribs. And then he did something he'd never done before: gave me a kiss, on my cheek.

"Good-bye, Zoë," he said.

"Good-bye, Magdy," I said. "Take care of Gretchen for me."

"I'll try," Magdy said. "But you know how she is." I smiled at that. Then he went to Gretchen, gave her a hug and a kiss, and left.

And then it was Gretchen and me, packing and talking and cracking each other up through the rest of the night. Eventually Mom and Dad went to sleep but didn't seem to mind that Gretchen and I went on through the night and straight on until morning.

A group of friends arrived in a Mennonite horse-drawn wagon to carry our things and us to the Conclave shuttle. We started the short journey laughing but got quiet as we came closer to the shuttle. It

wasn't a sad silence; it was a silence you have when you've said everything you need to say to another person.

Our friends lifted what we were taking with us into the shuttle; there was a lot we were leaving behind, too bulky to take, that we had given to friends. One by one all my friends gave me hugs and farewells, and dropped away, and then there was just Gretchen and me again.

"You want to come with me?" I asked.

Gretchen laughed. "Someone has to take care of Magdy," she said. "And Dad. And Roanoke."

"You always were the organized one," I said.

"And you were always *you*," Gretchen said.

"Someone had to be," I said. "And anyone else would have messed it up."

Gretchen gave me another hug. Then she stood back from me. "No good-byes," she said. "You're in my heart. Which means you're not gone."

"All right," I said. "No good-byes. I love you, Gretchen."

"I love you too," Gretchen said. And then she turned and she walked away, and didn't look back, although she did stop to give Babar a hug. He slobbered her thoroughly.

And then he came to me, and I led him into the passenger compartment of the shuttle. In time, everyone else came in. John. Jane. Savitri. Hickory. Dickory.

My family.

I looked out the shuttle window at Roanoke, my world, my home. Our home. But our home no longer. I looked at it and the people in it, some of whom I loved and some of whom I lost. Trying to take it all in, to make it a part of me. To make it a part of my story. My tale. To remember it so I can tell the story of my time here, not straight but true, so that anyone who asked me could feel what I felt about my time, on my world.

I sat, and looked, and remembered in the present time.

And when I was sure I had it, I kissed the window and drew the shade.

The engines on the shuttle came to life.

"Here we go," Dad said.

I smiled and closed my eyes and counted down the seconds until liftoff.

Five. Four. Three. Two.

One.

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Acknowledgments

At the end of my book *The Last Colony*, I mentioned that I was likely to step away from the "Old Man's War" universe for a while, and in particular that I was going to give the characters of John Perry and Jane Sagan a rest, and let them have their "happily ever after." So, it can be reasonably asked, what is *Zoe's Tale* doing here now?

There are a number of reasons, but two big ones have to do with reader feedback. The first was that I got a lot of mail that went like this: "Hey, *The Last Colony* was great. Now write another one. And make it about Zoë. Also, I want a pony." Well, I couldn't do anything about the pony (sorry), but the more I thought about it the more I realized that I was interested in knowing more about Zoë as well. Zoë had played critical supporting roles in *The Ghost Brigades* and *The Last Colony*, and enough had happened to her in the course of the books that I thought there would be enough to tell her story and make it interesting. It's up to you to tell me if I was right about that, but I'll say that I'm pretty happy.

The other bit of reader feedback involved two criticisms of *The Last Colony*. In that book, the "werewolves," the indigenous intelligent species of Roanoke, played a role in a critical plot point, and having done that, went away for the rest of the book. I thought I had sufficiently explained their disappearance, but more than a few readers were either unsatisfied with the explanation or missed it entirely, and so I got a bunch of mail that asked "Where did the werewolves go?" This annoyed me, not because the readers were complaining but because clearly I was not as clever explaining their exit from the story as I would have liked.

To go with this, there was some (totally fair) criticism of *TLC* that Zoë going off into space and somehow coming back with a "sapper

field" that was pretty much exactly what the defenders of Roanoke needed to defeat their attackers represented a complete *deus ex machina* maneuver on the part of a lazy writer. Yes, well. This is the problem of knowing more than your readers; as an author, I knew all the back story, but there was no way to get it into the book without wrenching the whole book onto a 30,000-word tangent. So I did a little hand waving and hoped I wouldn't get caught. Surprise! Apparently I have smart readers.

So in both these cases of reader dissatisfaction, writing *Zoe's Tale* allowed me a second bite at these apples, and in the process helped to make the events that take place in the "Old Man's War" universe more internally consistent and comprehensible. What have we learned here? Mostly that I do listen to feedback from my readers, both positive ("write more!") and negative ("fix that!"). Thanks for both.

Because I wanted to address reader questions, and because I thought it would be fun and interesting to do, I wrote *Zoe's Tale* to take place in parallel time to the events of *The Last Colony*, told from an entirely different point of view. Naturally, I'm not the first person to think of this clever trick (and here I perform a hat tip to my particular inspirations, Orson Scott Card with *Ender's Shadow* and Tom Stoppard for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*), but stupid me, I thought it would actually be *easy*.

Indeed, I recall actually saying this to Patrick Nielsen Hayden, my editor: "I already know the plot and the characters; how hard can it be?" Patrick did not do what he should have done, which was to grab me hard by the shoulders, shake me like a maraca and say, "Good God, man, are you *insane*?!?" Because here's a little secret: writing a parallel time novel that does not, in fact, just lazily retell the story in a previous book is *hard*. Like, the hardest thing I've done as a writer to this point. And, damn it, Patrick's job as my editor is to make everything *easy* for me. So I feel he bears some responsibility for my months of complete flailure trying to write the novel (yes, flailure: "failure" + "flailing" = flailure. Look it up). So, yes: I blame Patrick. For *everything*. There, I feel better now.

(Note: The above paragraph is a complete lie: Patrick's patience and understanding and advice during this writing process was invaluable.

But don't tell him that. Shhh. It's our little secret.)

The other really hard thing about *Zoe's Tale* was the fact that I was writing it from the point of view of a teenage girl, which is something I've never been, personally, and was a species of creature I can't say I actually *understood* back when I was a teenage boy (this will not come as news to my female contemporaries at high school).

For too long a time, I despaired how I would ever actually get a writing tone approximating that of an actual teenage girl, nor did I get particularly good advice from my male friends on this one. "So go hang out with teenage girls," is an I-swear-to-God actual quote from a male friend of mine, who is apparently oblivious to the social and legal implications of a thirty-eight-year-old emphatically un-Brad-Pitt-like man lurking around sophomore-aged girls.

So, I did something I think was smarter and less liable to get me a restraining order: I showed some of the work in progress to women I trust—all of whom, so I'm told, were teenage girls at one point in their lives. These women—Karen Meisner, Regan Avery, Mary Robinette Kowal, and especially my wife Kristine Blauser Scalzi—were instrumental in helping me find a voice that worked for Zoë, and equally unsparing when I got too caught up in my own imagined cleverness with the character. To the extent Zoë works as a character, you may credit their influence; to the extent that she doesn't, you can blame me.

I've already mentioned Patrick Nielsen Hayden as my editor, but there are others at Tor Books who have worked on the book as well, and I would like to offer my public thanks to them for their work. They include John Harris, who gave the book its most excellent cover; Irene Gallo, the world's best art director; copy editor Nancy Wiesenfeld, whom I pity for having to catch my many screwups; and my publicist at Tor, Dot Lin. Thanks also and as always to my agent Ethan Ellenberg, and also to Tom Doherty.

Friends! I have them, I don't even have to pay them, and they helped me keep it together when I felt like I was going to completely blow apart. Thanks in particular go to Anne KG Murphy, Bill Schafer, Yanni Kuznia and Justine Larbalestier, each of whom I spent more time chatting with on IM than I probably should have, but oh well. Devin

Desai called me on a regular basis, which also helped to keep me from bouncing off the proverbial walls. Thanks also to Scott Westerfeld, Doselle Young, Kevin Stampfl, Shara Zoll, Daniel Mainz, Mykal Burns, Wil Wheaton, Tobias Buckell, Jay Lake, Elizabeth Bear, Sarah Monette, Nick Sagan, Charlie Stross, Teresa Nielsen Hayden, Liz Gorinsky, Karl Schroeder, Cory Doctorow, Joe Hill, my sister Heather Doan, and lots of other folks whose names escape me at the moment because I always blank out when I start making lists of names.

Also, an extra special set of thanks to the readers of my blog Whatever, who had to put up with quite a lot of disruptions this year as I tried to get this book done. Fortunately, they're good at keeping themselves amused while I'm banging on the keyboard like a monkey. And a fond farewell to readers of By the Way and Ficlets.

Certain names in the book are borrowed from people I know, because I'm really bad at making up names. So hat tips are in order to my friends Gretchen Schafer, Magdy Tawadrous, Joe Rybicki, Jeff Hentosz, and Joe Loong, who has the special distinction of having been murdered in two of my books now. It's not a trend, Joe. I *swear*.

One final reason that I wanted to do *Zoe's Tale* is because I have a daughter of my own, Athena, and I wanted her to have a character of mine that she could feel kinship with. As I write this, my daughter is nine, which is quite a bit younger than Zoë is in this book, so it's not accurate to say the character is based on Athena. Nevertheless many of Athena's qualities are in evidence in Zoë, including some of her sense of humor and her awareness of who she is in the world. So my thanks and love go to Athena, for being an inspiration for this book, and for my life in general. This is her book.

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THE HUMAN DIVISION

John Scalzi

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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The Human Division is dedicated to the following:

To Yanni Kuznia and Brian Decker, for their love and friendship.

To John Harris, in admiration, and in appreciation for his art work for this novel and for all the Old Man's War books.
Thank you for your visions.

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Acknowledgments

Writing this particular installment of the Old Man's War universe came with its own unique set of challenges, not in the least was writing thirteen separate episodes that had to work as their own stand-alone stories while at the same time functioning as a novel when they were all stacked together. It was a hell of a lot of fun, but it was also a hell of a lot of work.

To that end, my first acknowledgment here is to my editor, Patrick Nielsen Hayden, whose confidence in the book from the day I first suggested it through to the end of the process helped me considerably, especially on the days I sat there wondering what it was I had gotten myself into. His ability not to panic is a marvelously reassuring thing, and I thank him deeply for it.

Likewise, thanks to Irene Gallo for managing the art side of things, which for this project (especially the electronic version) was far more intensive than it usually is. Irene is the best art director in science fiction and possibly all of publishing, and I am always indebted to her work on my behalf.

Cover artist John Harris's contribution to *The Human Division* is significant enough that I have codedicated the entire book to him, but I want to acknowledge again his spectacular work for the book and for the individual episodes. It was a joy to see all the art for the first time, and a greater joy to get to show it all off to you. The book would not be the same without his efforts.

The copyediting of this particular book was an undertaking of its own epic scale, and for that thanks are in order to Sona Vogel. Thank you for catching my many errors. Also thank you to Heather Saunders

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The Human Division was not only released as a print book but also electronically, by episode. This was new territory for Tor and for Macmillan, who went out on a limb to try a new way of getting stories to readers. For getting out on that limb, I am indebted to Tom Doherty, Linda Quinton, Fritz Foy, Dan Schwartz, and Brian Napack.

There are always people I should thank at Tor whom I miss. I hope they will accept my apologies and know I am glad they do the work they do for me and other authors.

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The electronic edition of *The Human Division* featured dedications for each individual episode. The people to whom those individual episodes were dedicated to were (in order of episode dedication) Brad Roberts and Carl Rigney; Alex Seropian, Tim Harris, Hardy LeBel, and Mike Choi; Alexis Saarela, Patty Garcia, and Tor Publicity; Paul Sabourin and Greg DiCostanzo; Glenn Reynolds; Jonathan Coulton; the SFWA 2012–13 Board of Directors; Diana Sherman; Jared Cloud and Joanna Beu; The Webb Schools of California Class of 1987; Rena Watson Hawkins; Megan Totusek and Jesi Pershing.

As I was writing *The Human Division* I was also touring for *Redshirts* (my previous novel) and doing a staggering amount of travel. Trying to keep my head in the novel while at the same time doing everything else I was doing was a dizzying experience, to say the least. Friends who helped keep me sane through all of this include (in no

particular order) Karen Meisner, Deven Desai, Mary Robinette Kowal, Joe Hill, Kyle Cassidy, Doselle Young, Wil Wheaton, Bill Shafer, Kate Baker, Pat Rothfuss, Natasha Kordus, Robert Lawrence, Jenny Lawson, Pamela Ribon, Lorraine Garland, Neil Gaiman, Paolo Bacigalupi, Hiro Sasaki, Dave Klecha, Yanni Kuznia, Karen Healey, Justine Larbalestier, Adam Lisberg, and Daniel Mainz. Thank you all for putting up with me while I was at loose ends. I am forgetting people. I am sorry. My brain, it is still recovering. Forgive me.

Thanks also to the board of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, for putting up with me essentially falling into a hole for the month of October while I was finishing up the novel: Jim Fiscus, Matthew Johnson, Ann Leckie, Lee Martindale, Bud Sparhawk, Cat Valente, and Sean Williams. Sorry, guys. It won't happen again while I'm president. I promise.

And of course, thanks always to Kristine and Athena Scalzi, whom I love more than is entirely sensible and I'm just fine with that.

Finally, thank you. You guys have been asking me to go back to the Old Man's War universe for a while; I wanted to make sure that if I did, it would be worth your time to make the trip. I hope you enjoyed it. I enjoyed writing it for you. Thanks for making it possible.

—John Scalzi
October 27, 2012

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EPISODE ONE

The B-Team, Parts One and Two

PART ONE

I.

Ambassador Sara Bair knew that when the captain of the *Polk* had invited her to the bridge to view the skip to the Danavar system, protocol strongly suggested that she turn down the invitation. The captain would be busy, she would be in the way and in any event there was not that much to see. When the *Polk* skipped dozens of light-years across the local arm of the galaxy, the only way a human would register the fact would be that their view of the stars would change slightly. On the bridge, that view would be through display screens, not windows. Captain Basta had offered the invitation merely as a formality and was sure enough of its rejection that she had already made arrangements for the ambassador and her staff to have a small reception marking the skip in the *Polk*'s tiny and normally unused observation desk, wedged above the cargo hold.

Ambassador Bair knew protocol suggested she turn down the invitation, but she didn't care. In her twenty-five years in the Colonial Union diplomatic corps she'd never once been on a starship bridge, didn't know when she'd be invited to one again, and regardless of protocol, she was of the opinion that if one was going to issue an invitation, one should be prepared to have it accepted. If her negotiations with the Utche went well, and at this point in the game

there was no reason to suspect they would not, no one anywhere would care about this single breach of convention.

So screw it, she was going to the bridge.

If Captain Basta was annoyed by Bair accepting her invitation, she didn't show it. Lieutenant Evans produced the ambassador and her assistant, Brad Roberts, on the bridge five minutes prior to skip; the captain disengaged from her duties and quickly but politely welcomed the pair to the bridge. Formalities fulfilled, she turned her attention back to her pre-skip duties. Lieutenant Evans, knowing his cue, nudged Bair and Roberts into a corner where they could observe without interfering.

"Do you know how a skip works, Ambassador?" Evans asked. For the duration of the mission, Lieutenant Evans was the *Polk*'s protocol officer, acting as a liaison between the diplomatic mission and the ship's crew.

"My understanding of it is that we are in one place in space, and then the skip drive turns on, and we are magically someplace else," Bair said.

Evans smiled. "It's not magic, it's physics, ma'am," he said. "Although the high-end sort of physics that looks like magic from the outside. It's to relativistic physics what relativistic physics is to Newtonian physics. So that's two steps beyond everyday human experience."

"So we're not really breaking the laws of physics here," Roberts said. "Because every time I think of starships skipping across the galaxy, I imagine Albert Einstein in a policeman's uniform, writing up a ticket."

"We're not breaking any laws. What we're doing is literally exploiting a loophole," Evans said, and then launched into a longer explanation of the physics behind skipping. Roberts nodded and never took his eyes off of Evans, but he had a small smile on his face that Bair knew was meant for her. It meant that Roberts was aware he was doing one of his primary tasks, which was to draw away from Bair people

who wanted to make pointless small talk with her, so she could focus on what she was good at: paying attention to her surroundings.

Her surroundings were not in fact all that impressive. The *Polk* was a frigate—Bair was sure Evans would know what type specifically, but she didn't want to train his attention back on her at the moment—and its bridge was modest. Two rows of desks with monitors, with a slightly raised platform for the captain or officer of the watch to oversee operations, and two large monitors forward to display information and, when desired, an outside view. At the moment neither display was on; the bridge crew were instead focused on their individual monitors, with Captain Basta and her executive officer walking among them, murmuring.

It was about as exciting as watching paint dry. Or more accurately, as exciting as watching a crew of highly trained individuals do an action they have done hundreds of times before without drama or incident. Bair, who by dint of years in the diplomatic corps was aware that trained professionals doing their thing was not usually a gripping spectator sport, was nevertheless vaguely disappointed. Years of dramatic entertainments had prepared her for something more action oriented. She sighed without realizing it.

"Not what you were expecting, ma'am?" Evans asked, turning his attention back to the ambassador.

"I didn't know what to expect," Bair said, annoyed with herself at having sighed loudly enough to be heard, but hiding it. "The bridge is more quiet than I would have assumed."

"The bridge crew has worked together for a long time," Evans said. "And you have to remember that they pass a lot of information internally." Bair looked over to Evans with an arched eyebrow at this; Evans smiled and pointed a finger to his temple.

Oh, right, Bair thought. Captain Basta and the rest of the bridge crew were all members of the Colonial Defense Forces. This meant that aside from the obvious distinguishing genetically-engineered characteristics of green skin and a youthful appearance, each of them

had a computer called a BrainPal nestled up inside their brains. CDF members could use their BrainPals to talk or share data with one another; they didn't have to use their mouths to do it. The murmuring indicated that they still did, however, at least part of the time. CDF members used to be normal people without green skin or computers in their heads. Old habits died hard.

Bair, who had been born on the planet Erie and had spent the last twenty years stationed out of the Colonial Union home planet of Phoenix, had neither green skin nor a computer in her head. But she had spent enough time around CDF members during her diplomatic travels that they no longer seemed particularly notable among the variety of humans she worked with. She sometimes forgot that they were, in fact, a genetically-engineered breed apart.

"One minute to skip," said the *Polk*'s executive officer. Bair's brain popped up a name: Everett Roman. Aside from Commander Roman's notation of the time, nothing else on the bridge had changed; Bair suspected the announcement was for her and Roberts's benefit. Bair's eyes flicked over to the large monitors to the fore of the room. They were still dark.

"Commander Roman," Evans said, and then motioned his head toward the monitors when he had gotten the executive officer's attention. The XO nodded. The monitors sprang to life, one with an image of a star field, the other with a simple schematic of the *Polk*.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Evans," Bair said, quietly. Evans smiled.

Commander Roman counted off the last ten seconds of the skip. Bair trained her eyes on the monitor showing the star field. When Roman counted zero, the stars in the field seemed to shift at random. Bair knew that the stars hadn't actually shifted. These were entirely new stars. The *Polk* had, without fuss or noise, instantly traveled light-years.

Bair blinked, unsatisfied. If you thought about what just happened in terms of what was physically accomplished, it was a staggering event. As a personal human experience, however …

"So that's it?" Roberts asked, to no one in particular.

"That's it," Evans said.

"Not very exciting," Roberts said.

"Not exciting means we did it right," Evans said.

"Well, where's the fun in that?" Roberts joked.

"Other people can do fun," Evans said. "We do precise. We get you where you need to go, on time. Or ahead of time, in this case. We were asked to get you here three days ahead of the Utche arrival. We delivered you three days, six hours early. Here you are, ahead of time twice."

"About that," Bair said. Evans turned his head to the ambassador to give her his full attention.

The deck of the bridge leaped up at the trio, with violence.

Voices on the bridge suddenly became very loud, detailing damage to the ship. Hull breaches, loss of power, casualties. Something had gone very wrong with the skip.

Bair looked up from the deck and saw that the images on the monitors had changed. The schematic of the ship now featured sections blinking in red. The star field had been replaced with a representation of the *Polk* in three-dimensional space. It was at the center of the representation. At the periphery of the representation was an object, heading toward the *Polk*.

"What is that?" Bair asked Evans, who was picking himself up off the deck.

Evans looked at the screen and was quiet for a second. Bair knew he was accessing his BrainPal for more information. "A ship," he said.

"Is it the Utche?" Roberts asked. "We can signal them for help."

Evans shook his head. "They're not the Utche."

"Who are they?" Bair asked.

"We don't know," Evans said.

The monitors chirped, and then there were multiple additional objects on the screen, heading quickly toward the *Polk*.

"Oh, God," Bair said, and stood as the bridge crew reported missiles en route.

Captain Basta ordered the missiles lanced out of the sky and then turned toward Bair—or, more directly, to Evans. "Those two," she said. "Escape pod. Now."

"Wait—," Bair began.

"No time, Ambassador," Basta said, cutting her off. "Too many missiles. My next two minutes are about getting you off the ship alive. Don't waste them." She turned back to her bridge crew, telling them to prep the black box.

Evans grabbed Bair. "Come on, Ambassador," he said, and pulled her off the bridge, Roberts following.

Forty seconds later, Bair and Roberts were shoved by Evans into a cramped box with two small seats. "Strap in," Evan said, yelling to make himself heard. He pointed below one of the seats. "Emergency rations and hydration there." He pointed below the other. "Waste recycler there. You have a week of air. You'll be fine."

"The rest of my team—," Bair said again.

"Is being shoved into escape pods right now," Evans said. "The captain will launch a skip drone to let the CDF know what happened. They keep rescue ships at skip distance for things just like this. Don't worry. Now strap in. These things launch rough." He backed out of the pod.

"Good luck, Evans," Roberts said. Evans grimaced as the pod sealed itself. Five seconds later, the pod punched itself off the *Polk*. Bair felt as if she had been kicked in the spine and then felt weightless. The pod was too small and basic for artificial gravity.

"What the hell just happened back there?" Roberts said, after a minute. "The *Polk* was hit the instant it skipped."

"Someone knew we were on our way," Bair said.

"This mission was confidential," Roberts said.

"Use your head, Brad," Bair said, testily. "The mission was confidential on our end. It could have leaked. It could have leaked on

the Utche side."

"You think the Utche set us up?" Roberts asked.

"I don't know," Bair said. "They're in the same situation as we are. They need this alliance as much as we do. It doesn't make any sense for them to string the Colonial Union along just to pull a stupid stunt like this. Attacking the *Polk* doesn't gain them anything. Destroying a CDF ship is a flat-out enemy action."

"The *Polk* might be able to fight it out," Roberts said.

"You heard Captain Basta as well as I did," Bair said. "Too many missiles. And the *Polk* is already damaged."

"Let's hope the rest of our people made it to their escape pods, then," Roberts said.

"I don't think they were sent to the other escape pods," Bair said.

"But Evans said—"

"Evans said what he needed to shut us up and get us off the *Polk*," Bair said.

Roberts was quiet at this.

Several minutes later, he said, "If the *Polk* sent a skip drone, it will need, what, a day to reach skip distance?"

"Something like that," Bair said.

"A day for the news to arrive, a few hours to gear up, a few hours after that to find us," Roberts said. "So two days in this tin can. Best-case scenario."

"Sure," Bair said.

"And then we'll be debriefed," Roberts said. "Not that we can tell them anything about who attacked us or why."

"When they look for us, they'll also be looking for the *Polk*'s black box," Bair said. "That will have all the data from the ship right up until the moment it was destroyed. If they were able to identify the attacking ships at any point, it'll be in there."

"If it survived the destruction of the *Polk*," Roberts said.

"I heard Captain Basta tell her bridge crew to prep the box," Bair said. "I'm guessing that means that they had time to do whatever they

needed to to make sure it survived the ship."

"So you, me and a black box are all that survived the *Polk,*" Roberts said.

"I think so. Yes," Bair said.

"Jesus," Roberts said. "Has anything like this ever happened to you before?"

"I've had missions go badly before," Bair said, and looked around the confines of the escape pod. "But, no. This is a first."

"Let's hope the best-case scenario is what we get here," Roberts said. "If it's not, then in about a week things are going to get bad."

"After the fourth day we'll take turns breathing," Bair said.

Roberts laughed weakly and then stopped himself. "Don't want to do that," he said. "Waste of oxygen."

Bair began to laugh herself and then was surprised as the air from her lungs rushed the other way, pulled out by the vacuum of space invading the escape pod as it tore apart. Bair had an instant to register the look on her assistant's face before the shrapnel from the explosion that was shredding the escape pod tore into them as well, killing them. She had no final thoughts, other than registering the feel of the air sliding past her lips and the brief, painless *pushing* feeling the shrapnel made as it went through and then out of her. There was a final, distant sensation of cold, then heat, and then nothing at all.

II.

Sixty-two light-years away from the *Polk,* Lieutenant Harry Wilson stood stiffly near the edge of a seaside cliff on the planet Farnut, along with several other members of the Colonial Union diplomatic courier ship *Clarke*. It was a gorgeous, sunny day, warm without being so hot that the humans would sweat in their formal attire. The Colonial diplomats formed a line; parallel to that line was a line of Farnutian diplomats, their limbs resplendent in formal jewelry. Each human diplomat held a baroquely decorated flagon, filled with water brought

specially from the *Clarke*. At the head of each line was the chief diplomat for each race at the negotiation: Ckar Cnutdin for the Farnutians and Ode Abumwe for the Colonials. Cnutdin was currently at a podium, speaking in the glottal Farnutian language. Ambassador Abumwe, to the side, appeared to listen intently, nodding from time to time.

"What is he saying?" Hart Schmidt, standing next to Wilson, asked, as quietly as possible.

"Standard boilerplate about friendship between nations and species," Wilson said. As the sole member of the Colonial Defense Forces in the diplomatic mission, he was the only one in the line able to translate Farnutian on the fly, via his BrainPal; the rest of them had relied on translators provided by the Farnutians. The only one of those present at the ceremony was now standing behind Ambassador Abumwe, whispering discreetly into her ear.

"Does it sound like he's wrapping up?" Schmidt asked.

"Why, Hart?" Wilson glanced over to his friend. "You in a rush to get to the next part?"

Schmidt flicked his eyes toward his opposite number on the Farnutian line and said nothing.

As it turned out, Cnutdin was indeed just finishing. He did a thing with his limbs that was the Farnutian equivalent of bowing and stepped back from the podium. Ambassador Abumwe bowed and stepped toward the podium for her speech. Behind her, the translator shifted over to stand behind Cnutdin.

"I want to thank Trade Delegate Cnutdin for his stirring words about the growing friendship between our two great nations," Abumwe began, and then launched into boilerplate of her own, her words delivered with an accent that betrayed her status as a first-generation Colonial. Her parents had emigrated from Nigeria to the Colonial planet of New Albion when Abumwe was an infant; traces of that country's speech overlaid the New Albion rasp that reminded Wilson of the American Midwest that he had grown up in.

Not too long ago, in an attempt to start a rapport with the ambassador, Wilson had noted to Abumwe that the two of them were the only members of the *Clarke* crew who had been born on Earth, the rest of the crew having been Colonials all their life. Abumwe had narrowed her eyes at him, asked him what he was implying and stalked off angrily. Wilson had turned to his friend Schmidt, who was looking on with horror, and asked what he had done wrong. Schmidt told him to access a news feed.

That was how Wilson learned that the Earth and the Colonial Union appeared to be undergoing a trial separation and were probably headed for a divorce. And learned about who was splitting them apart.

Ah, well, Wilson thought, watching Abumwe wrap up her speech. Abumwe had never warmed to him; he was pretty sure she vaguely resented having any CDF presence on her ship, even in the relatively innocuous form of a technology advisor, which was Wilson's role. But as Schmidt liked to point out, it wasn't personal. By all indications, Abumwe had never really warmed up to anyone, ever. Some people just didn't like people.

Not the best temperament for a diplomat, Wilson thought, not for the first time.

Abumwe stepped away from the podium, bowed deeply to Ckar Cnutdin, and at the end of her bow took her flagon and nodded to her line of diplomats. Cnutdin likewise signaled to his line.

"This is it," Schmidt said to Wilson, and then they both stepped forward, toward the Farnutians, just as the Farnutians slid forward to them. Each line stopped roughly half a meter from the other, still parallel.

As a unit and as they had practiced, every human diplomat, Ambassador Abumwe included, thrust forward their flagon. "We exchange water," they all said, and with ceremonial pomp upended their flagons, spilling the water at what passed for the Farnutians' feet.

The Farnutians replied with a hurking sound that Wilson's BrainPal translated as *We exchange water,* and then spewed from their mouths

seawater they had stored in their bodies' ballast bladders, directly into the faces of the human diplomats. Every human diplomat was drenched with salty, Farnutian body-temperature water.

"Thanks for that," Wilson said to his opposite number on the Farnutian line. But the Farnutian had already turned away, making a hiccuping sound at another of its kind as it broke ranks. Wilson's BrainPal translated the words.

Thank God that's *over,* it had said. *When do we get lunch?*

• • •

"You're unusually quiet," Schmidt said to Wilson, on the shuttle ride back to the *Clarke*.

"I'm ruminating on my life, and karma," Wilson said. "And what I must have done in a previous life to deserve being spit on by an alien species as part of a diplomatic ceremony."

"It's because the Farnutian culture is so tied to the sea," Schmidt said. "Exchanging the waters of their homeland is a symbolic way to say our fates are now tied together."

"It's also an excellent way to spread the Farnutian equivalent of smallpox," Wilson said.

"That's why we got shots," Schmidt said.

"I would at least like to have poured the flagon on someone's head," Wilson said.

"That wouldn't have been very diplomatic," Schmidt said.

"And spitting in *our* faces is?" Wilson's voice rose slightly.

"Yes, because that's how they cement their deals," Schmidt said. "And they also know that when humans spit in someone's face, or pour water on someone's head, it doesn't mean the same thing. So we devised something that everyone agreed was symbolically acceptable. It took our advance team three weeks to hammer that out."

"They could have hammered out a deal where the Farnutians learn to *shake hands,*" Wilson pointed out.

"We *could* have," Schmidt agreed. "Except for the little fact that we need this trade alliance a lot more than they do, so we have to play by their rules. It's why the negotiations are on Farnut. It's why Ambassador Abumwe accepted a deal that's a short-term loser. It's why we stood there and got spit on and said thank you."

Wilson looked toward the forward part of the shuttle, where the ambassador sat with her top aides. Schmidt didn't rate inclusion; Wilson certainly didn't. They sat in the back, in the cheap seats. "She got a bad deal?" he asked.

"She was *told* to get a bad deal," Schmidt said, looking toward the ambassador as well. "That defense shielding you trained their people on? We traded it for agricultural products. We traded it for fruit. We don't need their fruit. We can't eat their fruit. We're probably going to end up taking everything they give us and stewing it down to ethanol or something pointless like that."

"Then why did we make the deal?" Wilson asked.

"We were told to think of it as a 'loss leader,'" Schmidt said. "Something that gets the Farnutians through the door so we can make better deals later."

"Fantastic," Wilson said. "I can look forward to getting spit on again."

"No," Schmidt said, and settled back into his chair. "It's not us that will be coming back."

"Oh, right," Wilson said. "You get all the crappy diplomatic missions, and once you've done the scut work, someone else comes in for the glory."

"You say it like you're skeptical," Schmidt said to Wilson. "Come on, Harry. You've been with us long enough now. You've seen what happens to us. The missions we get are either low-level or ones where if they fail, it'll be easy enough to blame it on us, rather than our orders."

"Which kind was this one?" Wilson asked.

"Both," Schmidt said. "And so is the next one."

"This brings me back to my question about my karma," Wilson said.

"You probably set kittens on fire," Schmidt said. "And the rest of us were probably there with you, with skewers."

"When I joined the CDF we probably would have just shot the hell out of the Farnutians until they gave us what we wanted," Wilson said.

"Ah, the good old days," Schmidt said sarcastically, and then shrugged. "That was then. This is now. We've lost the Earth, Harry. Now we have to learn to deal with it."

"There's going to be a hell of a learning curve on that one," Wilson said, after a minute.

"You are correct," Schmidt said. "Be glad you don't have to be the teacher."

III.

I need to see you, Colonel Abel Rigney sent to Colonel Liz Egan, CDF liaison to the secretary of state. He was heading toward her suite of offices in the Phoenix Station.

I'm a little busy at the moment, Egan sent back.

It's important, Rigney sent.

What I'm doing right now is also *important,* Egan returned.

This is more importanter, Rigney sent.

Well, when you put it that *way,* Egan replied.

Rigney smiled. *I'll be at your office in two minutes,* he sent.

I'm not there, Egan returned. *Go to the State Department conference complex. I'm in Theater Seven.*

What are you doing there? Rigney sent.

Scaring the children, Egan replied.

Three minutes later, Rigney slipped into the back of Theater Seven. The room was darkened and filled with midlevel members of the Colonial Union diplomatic corps. Rigney took a seat at one of the higher rows in the room and looked across at the faces of the people

there. They appeared rather grim. Down on the floor of the theater stood Colonel Egan, a three-dimensional display, currently unlit, behind her.

I'm here, Rigney sent to Egan.

Then you can see I'm working, she replied. *Shut up and give me a minute.*

What Egan was doing was listening to one of the midlevel diplomats drone on in the vaguely condescending way that midlevel diplomats will do when presented with someone they assume is below their station. Rigney, who knew that in her past life Egan had been the CEO of a rather substantial media empire, settled in to enjoy the show.

"I'm not disagreeing that the new reality of our situation is challenging," the diplomat was saying. "But I'm not entirely convinced that the situation is as insoluble as your assessment suggests."

"Is that so, Mr. DiNovo," Egan said.

"I think so, yes," the diplomat named DiNovo said. "The human race has always been outnumbered out here. But we've managed to keep our place in the scheme of things. Small, albeit important details have changed here, but the fundamental issues are largely the same."

"Are they," Egan said. The display behind her flashed on, picturing a slowly rotating star field that Rigney recognized as the local interstellar neighborhood. A series of stars flashed blue. "To recap, here we are. All the star systems which have human planets in them. The Colonial Union. And here are all the star systems with other intelligent, star-faring races in them." The star field turned red as a couple thousand stars switched colors to show their allegiance.

"This is no different than what we've always had to work with," the diplomat named DiNovo said.

"Wrong," Egan said. "This star chart is misleading, and you, Mr. DiNovo, appear not to realize that. All that red up there *used* to represent hundreds of individual races, all of whom, like the human race, had to battle or negotiate with any other race they encountered. Some races were stronger than others, but none of them had any

substantial strength or tactical advantage over most of the others. There were too many civilizations too close to parity for any one of them to gain a long-term lead in the power struggle.

"That worked for us because we had one advantage other races didn't," Egan said. Behind her, one blue star system, somewhat isolated from the main arc of human systems, glowed more brightly. "We had Earth, which supplied the Colonial Union with two critical things: colonists, with which we could rapidly populate the planets we claimed, and soldiers, which we could use to defend those planets and secure additional worlds. Earth supplied the Colonial Union more of each than it would have been politically feasible to provide itself from its own worlds. This allowed the Colonial Union both a strategic and tactical advantage and allowed humanity to come close to upending the existing political order in our region of space."

"Advantages we can still exploit," DiNovo began.

"Wrong again," Egan said. "Because now two critical things have changed. First, there's the Conclave." Two-thirds of the formerly red stars turned yellow. "The Conclave, formed out of four hundred alien races which formerly fought among themselves, but now acting as a single political entity, able to enforce its policies by sheer mass. The Conclave will not allow unaffiliated races to engage in further colonization, but it does not stop those races from raiding each other for resources or for security purposes or to settle old scores. So the Colonial Union still has to contend with two hundred alien races targeting its worlds and ships.

"Second, there's Earth. Thanks to the actions of former Roanoke Colony leaders John Perry and Jane Sagan, the Earth has at least temporarily suspended its relationship with the Colonial Union. Its people now believe that we've been holding back the planet's political and technological development for decades to farm it for colonists and soldiers. The reality is more complicated, but as with most humans, the people on Earth prefer the simple answer. The simplest answer is the

Colonial Union's been screwing them. They don't trust us. They don't want anything to do with us. It may be years before they do."

"My point is that even without the Earth we still have advantages," DiNovo said. "The Colonial Union has a population of billions on dozens of planets rich with resources."

"And you believe that the colony worlds can replace the colonists and soldiers the Colonial Union until very recently received from Earth," Egan said.

"I'm not saying there won't be grumbling," DiNovo said. "But yes, they could."

"Colonel Rigney," said Egan, speaking her compatriot's name but keeping her eyes on DiNovo.

"Yes," Rigney said, surprised at being called on. An entire room of heads swiveled to look at him.

"You and I were in the same recruiting class," Egan said.

"That's right," Rigney said. "We met on the *Amerigo Vespucci*. That was the ship that took us from Earth to Phoenix Station. It was fourteen years ago."

"Do you remember how many recruits were on the *Vespucci*?" Egan asked.

"I remember the CDF representative telling us there were one thousand fifteen of us," Rigney said.

"How many of us are still alive?" Egan asked.

"There are eighty-nine," Rigney said. "I know that because one of us died last week and I got a notification. Major Darren Reith."

"So a ninety-one percent fatality rate over fourteen years," Egan said.

"That's about right," Rigney said. "The official statistic that the CDF tells recruits is that in ten years of service the fatality rate is seventy-five percent. In my experience, that official statistic is low. After ten years recruits are allowed to leave the service, but many of us stay in." *Because who wants to start getting old again,* Rigney thought, but did not say.

"Mr. DiNovo," Egan said, returning her full attention to her diplomat, "I believe you are originally from the colony of Rus, is that correct?"

"That's correct," DiNovo said.

"In its entire history of more than one hundred and twenty years, Rus has never been asked to supply the Colonial Union with soldiers," Egan said. "I want you to tell me how you believe the colony will respond when it is informed by the Colonial Union that it will require —*require,* not ask—one hundred thousand of its citizens annually to join the Colonial Defense Forces, and that at the end of those ten years seventy-five percent of them will be dead. I want you to tell me how the Rus citizens will respond when they learn that part of their job is to quell rebellions on colonies, which happens more often than the Colonial Union prefers to admit. How will recruits from Rus feel about firing on their own people? Will they do it? Will *you,* Mr. DiNovo? You are in your early fifties now, sir. You're not that far off from the CDF recruitment age. Are you ready to fight and very likely die for the Colonial Union? Because you are, in yourself, the *advantage* you say we have."

DiNovo had nothing to say to this.

"I've been giving these presentations to the diplomatic corps for a month now," Egan said, turning her eyes away from the silenced DiNovo and scanning the room. "In every presentation I have someone like Mr. DiNovo here making the argument that the situation we are in is not that bad. They, like he, are wrong. The Colonial Defense Forces lose a staggering number of soldiers on an annual basis and have for more than two hundred years. Our developing colonies cannot quickly grow themselves to a size sufficiently large to avoid extinction by breeding alone. The existence of the Conclave has changed the math of human survival in ways we cannot yet imagine. The Colonial Union has survived and thrived because it has exploited an unearned surplus of humans from Earth. We don't have that surplus anymore. And we

don't have the time to develop a new surplus from within the Colonial Union system and population."

"How bad is it, then?" Rigney heard himself ask. He was as surprised as anyone to hear his own voice.

Egan glanced at him, then drew her attention back to the crowd. "If things continue as they are, based on historical CDF fatality rates, in three years we'll no longer have sufficient forces to defend our colonies from predation and genocidal aggression by other races," she said. "From there, our best estimate is that the Colonial Union as a political entity collapses within five to eight years. Without the overarching protective structure of the Colonial Union, all remaining human planets are attacked and wiped out within twenty years. Which is to say, ladies and gentlemen, that from this very moment, the human race is thirty years from extinction."

The room was dead silent.

"The reason I'm telling you this is not so you can run home and hug your children," Egan said. "The reason I'm telling you this is that for more than two hundred years, the Department of State has been the vermiform appendix of the Colonial Union. An afterthought to the CU's strategy of aggressive defense and expansion." She stared at DiNovo. "A nice sinecure for mediocrities to be shoved into, where they can do no real harm. Well, all that changes now. The Colonial Union can no longer afford to live the way we've lived. We don't have the resources and we don't have the people. So from this moment forward the State Department has two missions. One: Bring Earth back into the fold, for the advantage of us both. Two: Whenever possible, avoid conflict with the Conclave and unaffiliated alien races. Diplomacy is the best way to make that happen.

"What that means, ladies and gentlemen, is that from now on, the Colonial Union State Department actually matters. And *you,* my friends, now all have to work for a living."

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"Do you always squash someone as hard as you squashed DiNovo?" Rigney asked. Theater Seven was now empty; the midlevel diplomats had shuffled out, grumbling to one another. He and Egan were now both standing near the display, which had again shut down.

"Usually," Egan said. "DiNovo was doing me a favor, actually. For every one like him who is stupid enough to open his mouth, there's about fifty of these people who keep their traps shut and plan to ignore what I have to say. This way I get to drive the message home to all of them. Marginally more of them will listen to me this way."

"You think they really are all mediocrities, then," Rigney said.

"Not all of them," Egan said. "Most of them. And certainly the ones *I* have to deal with." She waved at the empty theater. "These people are cogs. They're stationed here, pushing the proverbial paper. If they were any good at what they did, they'd be out there in the universe. The ones out there are the A-teams. Hell, they're the B-teams, too. The ones here are teams C through K."

"Then you're not going to like this," Rigney said. "One of your A-teams has gone missing."

Egan frowned. "Which one?" she asked.

"Ambassador Bair's team," Rigney said. "Along with, I should add, one of our frigates, the *Polk*."

Egan was silent for a moment, processing the news. "When did this happen?" she finally asked.

"It's been two days since there's been a skip drone sent back from the *Polk,*" Rigney said.

"And you're only telling me this now?" Egan said.

"I would have told you sooner, but you wanted me to see you scare the children," Rigney said. "And two days without drone contact is our standard alarm raiser. Particularly with missions like this one, which are supposed to be secret. I came to find you as soon as we confirmed two days of dead air."

"What did your recovery mission find?" Egan asked.

"No recovery mission," Rigney said, and caught Egan's look. "We had a hard enough time negotiating a military frigate for the mission. If the Utche show up and see several military ships in the area, none of them with diplomats on them, everything blows up."

"Recon drones, then," Egan said.

"Of course," Rigney said. "Everything's preliminary because the drones have just arrived, but they're not finding anything."

"You sent the drones to the correct system," Egan said.

"Come on, Liz," Rigney said.

"Doesn't hurt to ask," Egan said.

"We sent the drones to the right system," Rigney said. "We sent the *Polk* to the right system. The Danavar system is where the Utche wanted to meet."

Egan nodded. "A system with nothing but gas giants and airless moons. No one will think to look for you there. Perfect for secret negotiations."

"Apparently not so secret after all," Rigney said.

"You're presuming the *Polk* met with a bad end," Egan said.

"Our frigates don't have a history of randomly vaporizing," Rigney said. "But whatever or whoever did this isn't in the Danavar system now. There's nothing there but planets and moons and a big yellow star."

"Have we told the Utche about this?" Egan asked.

"We haven't told anyone about it," Rigney said. "Outside of command, you're the first person to know. We haven't even told your boss that her team is missing. We figured we'd let you do that yourself."

"Thanks," Egan said, wryly. "But surely the Utche have noticed there is no one negotiating a treaty with them."

"The *Polk* arrived three days early," Rigney said.

"Why?" Egan said.

"Ostensibly to give Bair's team time to prep away from the distractions of Phoenix Station," Rigney said.

"And in reality?" Egan asked.

"In reality to make sure we were militarily prepared for an immediate withdrawal if necessary," Rigney said.

"Seems drastic," Egan said.

"You'll recall the Utche have handed our ass to us in three out of the last five military engagements we've had with them," Rigney said. "Just because they came to us for this alliance doesn't mean we trust them entirely."

"And you don't think the Utche might have figured out the CU's trust issues," Egan said.

"We're pretty sure they have," Rigney said. "In part because we let them know we were arriving early. Your boss signed off on the cover story, but we don't assume the Utche are stupid. It was a sign to us of how much they want the alliance that they were willing to give us a tactical advantage."

"You've entertained the possibility the Utche blasted the *Polk* out of the sky," Egan said.

"Obviously," Rigney said. "But they've been as transparent with us as we've been with them, and where they're not transparent, we have spies. This is something we would have known about. And nothing they're doing indicates that they think anything is out of the ordinary. Their diplomatic mission is on a ship called the *Kaligm,* and it's a day out from skip distance."

Egan said nothing to this but instead fired up the display, turning to it. Phoenix Station floated in the display, the limb of the planet Phoenix below it. At a distance from Phoenix Station, CDF and trade ships floated; their names appeared in labels hovering aside them in the display. The image pulled out and both Phoenix Station and Phoenix shrank to a single dot, taking with them thousands of starships arriving at or departing from the Colonial Union's capital. The image pulled farther out and displayed, as dots, dozens of ships, each working its way toward a sufficiently flat spot of space-time to make a skip. Egan

began pulling information from a few, crew manifests spilling onto the display.

"Okay, I give up," Rigney said, after several minutes of this. "Tell me what you're doing."

"Ambassador Bair isn't on our A-list," Egan said, still scanning crew manifests. "She's on our A Plus–list. If she was pipped to negotiate, then this mission is an actual priority, not just a top secret diplomatic circle jerk."

"Okay," Rigney said. "So?"

"So, you don't know Secretary Galeano like I do," Egan said, naming the secretary of state. "If I walk into her office, tell her one of her best diplomats and her entire team is probably dead and their mission therefore a complete failure, without a backup plan already in place and ready to implement, things will be very grim indeed. I will be without a job, *you* will probably be without a job simply for being the messenger, and the secretary will go out of her way to make sure that the next posting for both of us will be someplace where our life expectancy will be measured with an egg timer."

"She sounds nice," Rigney said.

"She's perfectly lovely," Egan said. "Until you piss her off." The display, which had been scrolling through ships and crew manifests, suddenly stopped on a single ship. "Here."

Rigney peered up at the image. "What is this?"

"This is the B-team," Egan said.

"The *Clarke*?" Rigney said. "I don't know this ship."

"It handles various low-level diplomatic missions," Egan said. "Its chief diplomat is a woman named Abumwe." The image of a dark and severe-looking woman hovered on the screen. "Her most significant negotiation was with the Korba a few months back. She impressed them by having a CDF officer stationed on the ship fight with one of their soldiers, and lost in a diplomatically meaningful way."

"That's interesting," Rigney said.

"Yes, but not entirely her doing," Egan said, and popped up the images of two men, one of whom was green. "The fight was set up by a deputy, Hart Schmidt. Lieutenant Harry Wilson was the one who fought."

"So why these people?" Rigney asked. "What makes them the right people to take over this mission?"

"Two reasons," Egan said. "One, Abumwe was part of an embassy to the Utche three years ago. Nothing came of it at the time, but she has experience dealing with them. That means she can get brought up to speed quickly. Two"—she pulled out the view to show the *Clarke* in space—"the *Clarke* is eighteen hours away from skip distance. Abumwe and her people can still get to the Danavar system ahead of the Utche and participate in the negotiations, or at the very least allow us to set up a new round of talks. There's no other diplomatic mission that can make it on time."

"We send in the B-team because it's marginally better than nothing," Rigney said.

"Abumwe and her people aren't incompetent," Egan said. "They just wouldn't be your first choice. But right now we're short on choices."

"Right," Rigney said. "You're really going to sell this to your boss, then."

"Unless you have a better idea," Egan said.

"Not really," Rigney said, then furrowed his brow for a moment. "Although…"

"Although what?" Egan said.

"Bring up that CDF guy again," Rigney said.

Egan popped the image of Lieutenant Harry Wilson back onto the display. "What about him?" she said.

"He still on the *Clarke*?" Rigney asked.

"Yes," Egan said. "He's a technical advisor. Some of the *Clarke*'s recent missions have had military tech and weapons as part of the

negotiations. They have him on hand to train people on the machines we're offering. Why?"

"I think I may have found a way to sweeten your B-team plan to Secretary Galeano," Rigney said. "And to my bosses, too."

IV.

Wilson noted the expression Schmidt had when he looked up and saw him standing by the door of Ambassador Abumwe's conference room.

"You don't have to look *that* shocked," Wilson said, dryly.

"Sorry," Schmidt said. He moved to let other members of the *Clarke*'s diplomatic contingent into the room.

Wilson waved it away. "I'm not usually included this early in the discussion. It's fine."

"Do you know what this is about?" Schmidt said.

"Allow me to repeat: I'm not usually included this early in the discussion," Wilson said.

"Got it," Schmidt said. "Well, shall we, then?" The two of them entered the room.

The conference room was cramped, as was everything on the *Clarke*. The table, with eight seats, was already filled, with Ambassador Abumwe looking owlishly at Schmidt and Wilson as they entered. The two of them took positions against the wall opposite her.

"Now that we're all here," she said, with a pointed glance at Wilson and Schmidt, "let's get started. The Department of State, in its wisdom, has decided that our presence is no longer needed at Vinnedorg."

A groan went up from around the table. "Who are they giving our work to this time?" asked Rae Sarles.

"No one," Abumwe said. "Our superiors are apparently under the impression that these negotiations will somehow magically take care of themselves without a Colonial presence."

"That doesn't make any sense," said Hugh Fucci.

"I appreciate you telling me that, Hugh," Abumwe said. "I don't believe I would have figured that out on my own."

"Sorry, Ambassador," Fucci said, backtracking. "What I mean to say is that they've been having us working on these negotiations with the Vinnies for more than a year now. I don't understand why they want to threaten our momentum by interrupting what we're doing."

"Which is why we're having our little meeting today," Abumwe said, and then nodded to Hillary Drolet, her assistant, who pressed the screen of her PDA. "If you'll access your queues, you'll find the information on our new assignment."

Everyone at the table, and Schmidt, accessed their PDAs; Wilson accessed his BrainPal, found the document in his queue, and streamed the data in the bottom quarter of his field of vision.

"The Utche?" asked Nelson Kwok, after a minute. "Have the CU ever actually negotiated with them before?"

"I was part of a mission to them three years ago, before I took this posting," Abumwe said. "At the time, nothing seemed to come of it. But apparently we've been quietly negotiating with them for the last year or so."

"Who's been the lead?" Kwok asked.

"Sara Bair," Abumwe said.

Wilson noted that everyone looked up at the ambassador when she said this. Whoever this Sara Bair was, she was clearly a star.

"Why is she off the negotiations?" Sarles asked.

"I couldn't tell you," Abumwe said. "But she and her people are, and now we're on it."

"Too bad for her," Fucci said, and Wilson saw there were smiles around the table. Getting this Bair's sloppy seconds were preferable to the *Clarke*'s original mission, it seemed. Once again, Wilson wondered at what fate it was that brought him onto the *Clarke* to join its band of not-that-lovable losers. Wilson also couldn't help but notice that the only person at the table not smiling at the prospect of taking up the Utche negotiations was Abumwe herself.

"There's a lot of information in this package," Schmidt said. He was flicking his PDA screen and scrolling through the text. "How many days before we begin negotiating?"

And it was then that Abumwe smiled, notably thin and humorless though it was. "Twenty hours."

There was dead silence.

"You're joking," Fucci said. Abumwe gave him a look that clearly indicated she had reached the end of her patience with him for the day. Fucci wisely did not speak again.

"Why the rush?" Wilson asked. He knew Abumwe didn't like him; it wouldn't hurt for him to ask the question everyone else wanted to know but was too scared to ask.

"I couldn't say," Abumwe said evenly, looking at him briefly and then turning her attention to her staff. "And even if I could, the reason wouldn't matter for what we have to do now. We have sixteen hours before our jump and then four hours after that before the Utche are scheduled to arrive. After that we're on their schedule. They might want to meet immediately; they might want to meet in a day. We are going to go under the assumption they will want to begin negotiations immediately. That means you have the next twelve hours to get up to speed. After that, we'll have planning sessions before and after the jump. I hope you've gotten enough sleep in the last two days, because you're not getting any more for a while. Any questions?"

There were none. "Good," Abumwe said. "I don't believe I have to tell any of you that if these negotiations go well, then it is good for us. For all of us. If they go poorly, then it will go badly for all of us as well. But it will go especially poorly for whichever ones of you were not completely up to speed and dragged the rest of your team down with you. I need you to be crystal clear on that."

They were.

"Lieutenant Wilson, a word with you," Abumwe said, as the room began to clear. "You too, Schmidt." The room cleared except for the ambassador, Hillary Drolet, Schmidt and Wilson.

"Why did you ask about why there was a rush?" Abumwe asked.

Wilson made a conscious effort not to let the thought *I'm being called on the carpet for that?* show up on his face. "Because everyone wanted to know, but no one else wanted to ask, ma'am."

"Because they knew better," Abumwe said.

"Except possibly for Fucci, yes, ma'am," Wilson said.

"But you don't," Abumwe said.

"No, I know better, too," Wilson said. "But I still thought someone should ask."

"Hmmm," Abumwe said. "Lieutenant, what did it say to you that we have twenty hours to prepare for this negotiation?"

"Are you asking me to speculate, ma'am?" Wilson asked.

"It's rather obvious that's what I'm asking," Abumwe said. "You're Colonial Defense Forces. You no doubt have a military perspective on this."

"It's been years since I've been anywhere near actual combat, ma'am," Wilson said. "I've been with CDF Research and Development for years, even before they lent me to you and the *Clarke* as your tech consultant."

"But you *are* still CDF, yes?" Abumwe said. "You still have the green skin and the computer in your head. I imagine if you dig deeply, you might still have the ability to look at things from a military point of view."

"Yes, ma'am," Wilson said.

"Then give me your analysis," Abumwe said.

"Someone's humped the bunk," Wilson said.

"Excuse me?" Abumwe said. Wilson noted Schmidt suddenly looked paler than usual.

"Humped the bunk," Wilson repeated. "Screwed the pooch. Gone FUBAR. Insert your own metaphor for things going sideways here. You don't have to have military experience to see that; everyone in this room had that thought. Whatever this Sara Bair and her team were supposed to do, they blew it, and for whatever reason the Colonial

Union needs to attempt a salvage, so you and your team are the last-minute, last-chance substitute."

"And why us?" Abumwe said.

"Because you are good at what you do," Wilson said.

Abumwe's thin smile returned. "If I want smoke blown up my ass, Lieutenant, I could have your friend here," she said, nodding toward Schmidt.

"Yes, ma'am," Wilson said. "In that case, I'd guess because we're close to jump, which makes us easy to reroute, that you've had at least some experience with the Utche, and that if you fail, and you probably will because you're the last-minute replacement, you're low enough on the diplomatic totem pole that it can be chalked up to your incompetence." Wilson looked over to Schmidt, who looked as if he were about to implode. "Stop that, Hart," he said. "She asked."

"I did indeed," Abumwe said. "And you are right, Lieutenant. But only half-right. The other reason that they picked us is because of *you*."

"I beg your pardon?" Wilson said, now thoroughly confused.

"Sara Bair didn't fail at her task, she disappeared," Abumwe said. "Along with the whole of her diplomatic mission and a CDF frigate called the *Polk*. It and them, gone. No trace."

"That's not good," Wilson said.

"You are once again stating the obvious," Abumwe said.

"How do I matter here, ma'am?" Wilson said.

"They don't think the *Polk* just vanished, they think it was destroyed," Abumwe said. "And they need you to look for the black box."

"Black box?" Schmidt asked.

"A data recorder," Wilson said. "If the *Polk* was destroyed and the black box survived, then it could tell us what happened to the ship, and who killed it."

"And we couldn't find it without you?" Schmidt asked.

Wilson shook his head. "They're small and they don't send out a locator beacon unless they're pinged with an encrypted signal, specific

to that ship. It's a military-grade cipher. You need a very tall security clearance for that. They don't just hand those out to anyone, and not to anyone outside the CDF." He turned his attention to Abumwe. "But they don't just hand them out to random lieutenants, either."

"Then we are lucky you are not just a random lieutenant," Abumwe said. "I am told that in your history it seems that you once had a very high security clearance."

"I was part of a team doing research on BrainPal security," Wilson said. "Again, it's been years. I don't have that clearance level anymore."

"You didn't," Abumwe said. She nodded to her assistant, who once again pressed on her PDA. Wilson immediately saw a ping light for his queue in his peripheral vision. "Now you do."

"Okay," Wilson said slowly, and scanned the details of the security clearance. After a moment he spoke again. "Ambassador, I think you should know this security clearance comes with a level of executive authority that technically means I can give orders to the *Clarke*'s crew in the furtherance of my mission," he said.

"I would suggest you not try to exercise that privilege with Captain Coloma," Abumwe said. "She hasn't put anyone on the wrong side of an airlock, but if you gave her an order, she might make an exception for you."

"I will keep that in mind," Wilson said.

"Do," Abumwe said. "In the meantime, as you've no doubt read by now, your orders are to find the black box, decode it and find out what happened to the *Polk*."

"Got it, ma'am," Wilson said.

"It's been implied to me by my own superiors that your finding the black box is of equal or greater importance to me actually successfully concluding these negotiations with the Utche," Abumwe said. "To that end I have detailed you an aide for the duration." She nodded to Schmidt. "I don't need him. He's yours."

"Thank you," Wilson said, and noted that he'd never seen Hart look more pained than just now, when he had been deemed inessential

by his boss. “He’ll be useful.”

“He’d better be,” Abumwe said. “Because, Lieutenant Wilson, the warning I gave to my staff goes double for you. If you fail, this mission fails, even if my half goes well. Which means I will have failed because of you. I may be low on the diplomatic totem pole, but I am sufficiently high enough on it that when I push you, you will die from the fall.” She looked over to Schmidt. “And he’ll kill you when he lands.”

“Understood, ma’am,” Wilson said.

“Good,” Abumwe said. “One more thing, Lieutenant. Try to find that black box before the Utche arrive. If someone’s trying to kill us all, I want to know about it before our negotiating partners show up.”

“I’ll do my best,” Wilson said.

“Your best got you stationed on the *Clarke,*” Abumwe said. “Do better than that.”

V.

“Please stop that,” Wilson said to Schmidt, as they sat in the *Clarke* lounge, reviewing their project data.

Schmidt looked up from his PDA. “I’m not doing anything,” he said.

“You’re hyperventilating,” Wilson said. He had his eyes closed, the better to focus on the data his BrainPal was streaming at him.

“I’m breathing completely normally,” Schmidt said.

“You’ve been breathing like a labored elephant for the last several minutes,” Wilson said, still not opening his eyes. “Keep it up and you’re going to need a paper bag to breathe into.”

“Yes, well,” Schmidt said. “*You* get told you’re inessential by your boss and see how you feel.”

“Her people skills aren’t the best,” Wilson agreed. “But you knew that. And as my *assistant,* I actually do need you to be helpful to me. So stop thinking about your boss and think more about *our* predicament.”

"Sorry," Schmidt said. "I'm also not entirely comfortable with this assistant thing."

"I promise not to ask you to get me coffee," Wilson said. "Much."

"Thanks," Schmidt said, wryly. Wilson grunted and went back to his data.

"This black box," Schmidt said a few minutes later.

"What about it?" Wilson asked.

"Are you going to be able to find it?" Schmidt asked.

Wilson opened his eyes for this. "The answer to that depends on whether you want me to be optimistic or truthful," he said.

"Truthful, please," Schmidt said.

"Probably not," Wilson said.

"I lied," Schmidt said. "I want the optimistic version."

"Too late," Wilson said, and held out his hand as if he were cupping an imaginary ball. "Look, Hart. The 'black box' in question is a small, black sphere about the size of a grapefruit. The memory portion of the thing is about the size of a fingernail. The rest of it consists of the tracking beacon, an inertial field generator to keep the thing from floating down a gravity well, and a battery powering both of those two things."

"Okay," Schmidt said. "So?"

"So, one, the thing is intentionally small and black, so it will be difficult to find by anyone but the CDF," Wilson said.

"Right, but you're not *looking* for it," Schmidt said. "You're going to be pinging it. When it gets the correct signal, it will respond."

"It will, if it has power," Wilson said. "But it might not. We're working on the assumption the *Polk* was attacked. If it was attacked, then there was probably a battle. If there was a battle, then the *Polk* probably got torn apart, with the pieces of it flying everywhere from the added energy of the explosions. It's likely the black box probably spent all its energy trying to stay mostly in one place. In which case when we signal it, we're not going to get a response."

"In which case you'll have to look for it visually," Schmidt said.

"Right," Wilson said. "So, again: small black grapefruit in a search area that at this point is a cube tens of thousands of kilometers on a side. And your boss wants me to find it and examine it before the Utche arrive. So if we don't locate it within the first half hour after the skip, we're probably screwed." He leaned back and closed his eyes again.

"You seem untroubled by our imminent failure," Schmidt said.

"No point hyperventilating," Wilson said. "And anyway, I didn't say we *will* fail. It's just more likely than not. My job is to increase the odds of us succeeding, which is what I was doing before your labored breathing started to distract me."

"So what's my job?" Schmidt asked.

"Your job is to go to Captain Coloma and tell her what things I need, the list of which I just sent to your PDA," Wilson said. "And do it charmingly, so that our captain feels like a valued part of the process and not like she's being ordered around by a CDF field tech."

"Oh, I see," Schmidt said. "I get the hard part."

"No, you get the *diplomatic* part," Wilson said, cracking open an eye. "Rumor has it diplomacy is a thing you've been trained to do. Unless you'd like *me* to go talk to her while *you* figure out a protocol for searching a few million cubic kilometers of space for an object the size of a child's plaything."

"I'll just go ahead and go talk to the captain, then," Schmidt said, picking up his PDA.

"What a marvelous idea," Wilson said. "I fully endorse it." Schmidt smiled and left the lounge.

Wilson closed his eyes again and focused once more on his own problem.

Wilson was more calm about the situation than Schmidt was, but that was in part to keep his friend on the right side of useful. Hart could be twitchy when stressed.

In fact, the problem was troubling Wilson more than he let on. One scenario he didn't tell Hart about at all was the one where the black box

didn't exist. The classified information that Wilson had included preliminary scans of the chunk of space that the *Polk* was supposed to have been in; the debris field was almost nonexistent, meaning that either the ship was attacked with such violence that it had vaporized, or whoever attacked the *Polk* took the extra time to atomize any chunk of debris larger than half a meter on a side. Either way it didn't look good.

If it *had* survived, Wilson had to work on the assumption that its battery was thoroughly drained and that it was floating, quiet and black, out in the vacuum. If the *Polk* had been nearer to one of the Danavar system planets, he might have a tiny chance of picking up the box visually against the planet's sphere, but its skip position into the Danavar system was sufficiently distant from any of that system's gas giants that even that "Hail Mary" approach was out of the question.

So: Wilson's task was to find a dark, silent object that might not exist in a debris field that mostly didn't exist, in a cube of space larger than most terrestrial planets.

It was a pretty problem.

Wilson didn't want to admit how much he was enjoying it. He'd had any number of jobs over his two lifetimes—from corporate lab drone to high school physics teacher to soldier to military scientist to his current position as field tech trainer—but in every one of them, one of his favorite things to do was to whack away at a near insoluble problem for hours on end. With the exception that this time he had rather fewer hours to whack away on this problem than he'd like, he was in his element.

The real problem here is the black box itself, Wilson thought, calling up what information he had on the objects. The idea of a travel data recorder had been around for centuries, and the phrase "black box" got its cachet with terrestrial air travel. Ironically, almost none of the "black boxes" of those bygone days were actually black; they were typically brightly colored to be made easy to find. The CDF wanted their black boxes found, but only by the right people. They made them as black as they could.

"Black box, black hole, black body," Wilson said to himself.

Hey.

Wilson opened his eyes and sat up.

His BrainPal pinged him; it was Schmidt. Wilson opened the connection. "How's diplomacy?" he asked.

"Uh," Schmidt said.

"Be right there," Wilson said.

• • •

Captain Sophia Coloma looked every inch of what she was, which was the sort of person who was not here to put up with your shit. She stood on her bridge, imposing, eyes fixed at the portal through which Wilson stepped. Neva Balla, her executive officer, stood next to her, looking equally displeased. On the other side of the captain was Schmidt, whose studiously neutral facial expression was a testament to his diplomatic training.

"Captain," Wilson said, saluting.

"You want a shuttle," Coloma said, ignoring the salute. "You want a shuttle and a pilot and access to our sensor equipment."

"Yes, ma'am," Wilson said.

"You understand you want these as we are about to skip into what is almost certainly a hostile situation, and directly before sensitive negotiations with an alien race," Coloma said.

"I do," Wilson said.

"Then you can explain to me why I should prioritize your needs over the needs of every other person on this ship," Coloma said. "As soon as we skip, I need to scan the area for any hostiles. I need to scan the area comprehensively. I'm not going to let the *Clarke*'s sole shuttle out of its bay before I'm absolutely certain it and we are not going to be shot out the sky."

"Mr. Schmidt explained to you my current level of clearance, I imagine," Wilson said.

"He did," Coloma said. "I've also been informed that Ambassador Abumwe has given your needs a high priority. But this is still my ship."

"Ma'am, are you saying that you will go against the orders of your superiors?" Wilson asked, and noticed Coloma thin her lips at this. "I'm not speaking of myself here. The orders come from far above both of us."

"I have every intention of following orders," Coloma said. "I also intend to follow them when it makes sense to do so. Which is after I've made sure we're safe, and the ambassador and her team are squared away."

"As far as the scanning goes, what you need to do and what I need to do dovetail," Wilson said. "Share the data with me and run a couple of scans that I need and I'll be fine. The scans I need to run will add another layer of security to your own scans."

"I'll run them after I've run our standard scans," Coloma said.

"That's fine," Wilson said. "Now, about the shuttle—"

"No shuttle, no pilot," Coloma said. "Not until after I've sent Abumwe to the Utche."

Wilson shook his head. "I need the shuttle before then," he said. "The ambassador told me to find and access the black box before she met with the Utche. She wanted to know whether there is a danger to them, not only us."

"She doesn't have authority on this," Coloma said.

"But I do, ma'am, and I agree with her," Wilson said. "We need to know everything we can before the Utche arrive. It's going to put a damper on negotiations if one of us explodes. Especially if we could have avoided it. Ma'am."

Coloma was silent.

"I'd like to make a suggestion," Schmidt said, after a minute.

Coloma looked at Schmidt as if she'd forgotten that he was there. "What is it?" she asked.

"The reason we need the shuttle is to get the black box," Schmidt said. "We don't know if we can find the black box. If we don't find it,

we don't need it. If we don't find it within the first hour or so, then even if we found it we couldn't retrieve it before the Utche show up and you would need the shuttle for Ambassador Abumwe's team. So let's say that we have the shuttle on standby for that first hour. If we find it by then, once you're confident the area is secure, we'll go out and get it. If we find it after, we wait until after you've delivered the ambassador's team to the Utche."

"I can live with that," Wilson said. "If you'll bump up my scans in your queue."

"And if I don't believe the area is secure?" Coloma said.

"I'll still need to go get it," Wilson said. "But if I know where it is, between autopilot and my BrainPal, I can go get it myself. You won't have to risk your pilot."

"Just the shuttle," Coloma said. "Because that's not in any way *significant*."

"Sorry, ma'am," Wilson said, and waited.

Coloma glanced at her executive officer. "Have Mr. Schmidt here get Neva your information. We have four hours to jump. Sometime in the next half hour will be fine."

"Yes, Captain," Wilson said. "Thank you, ma'am." He saluted again. Coloma returned the salute this time. Wilson turned to go, Schmidt hustling by the captain to catch up with him.

"Lieutenant, one more thing," Coloma said.

Wilson turned back to her. "Ma'am?"

"Just so you know, if you take the shuttle out, any damage you put on it, I'm taking out on you," she said.

"I'll treat it like it was my own car," Wilson said.

"See that you do," Coloma said. She turned away. Wilson took the hint.

"That was a nice touch about the car," Schmidt said, once the two of them were off the bridge.

"As long as you don't know about what happened to my last car, yes," Wilson said.

Schmidt stopped.

"Relax, Hart," Wilson said. "It was a joke. Come on. Lots to do." He kept walking.

After a minute, Schmidt followed.

PART TWO

VI.

"That was XO Balla," Schmidt said. He and Wilson were in an unused storage room, where Wilson had set up a three-dimensional monitor. They had waited out the skip into the Danavar system in its confines. "The *Clarke* sent out a ping using the *Polk*'s encrypted signal. Got nothing back."

"Of course we didn't," Wilson said. "Why would the universe make it easy for us?"

"What do we do now?" Schmidt asked.

"Let me answer that question with a question," Wilson said. "How does one look for a black box?"

"Are you serious?" Schmidt said, after a second. "We're running out of time here and you want to have a Socratic dialogue with me?"

"I wouldn't put this on the level of Socrates, but yeah, I do," Wilson said. "It's the former high school physics teacher in me. And call me crazy, but I think you'll actually be more helpful to me if I don't treat you like a completely useless monkey. I'm going to go on the assumption that you might have a brain."

"Thanks," Schmidt said.

"So, how does one look for a black box?" Wilson asked. "In particular, a black box that doesn't want to be found?"

"Fervent prayer," Schmidt said.

"You're not even trying," Wilson said, reprovingly.

"I'm new at this," Schmidt said. "Give me a hint."

"Fine," Wilson said. "You start by looking for what the black box was originally attached to."

"The *Polk,*" Schmidt said. "Or what's left of it."

"Very good, my young apprentice," Wilson said.

Schmidt shot him a look, then continued. "But you told me that the previous scans of the area from the automated drones didn't turn up anything."

"True," Wilson said. "But those were preliminary scans, done quickly. The *Clarke* has better sensors." He dimmed the light in the storage room and fired up the monitor, which appeared to show nothing but a small, single dot at the center of its display.

"That's not the *Polk,* is it?" Schmidt asked.

"It's the *Clarke,*" Wilson said. A series of concentric circles appeared, arrayed on three axes. "And this is the area the *Clarke* is intensively scanning, with distance displayed logarithmically. It's about a light-minute to the outer edge."

"If you say so," Schmidt said.

Wilson didn't take the bait and instead called up another dot, close to the *Clarke*'s dot. "This is where the *Polk* was supposed to have appeared after its skip," he said. "Let's assume it blew up when it arrived. What would we expect to see?"

"The remains of the ship, somewhere close to where the ship was supposed to be," Schmidt said. "But to repeat myself, the drone scans didn't turn up anything."

"Right," Wilson said. "So now let's use the *Clarke*'s sensor scans, and see what we get. This is using the *Clarke*'s standard array of LIDAR, radio and radar active scanning."

Several yellow spheres appeared, including one near the *Polk*'s entry point.

"Debris," Schmidt said, and pointed to the sphere closest to the *Polk*.

"It's not conclusive," Wilson said.

"Come on," Schmidt said. "The correlation is pretty strong, wouldn't you say?"

Wilson pointed to the other spheres. "What the *Clarke* is picking up is agglomerations of matter dense enough to reflect back its signals. These can't all be ship debris. Maybe this one isn't, either. Maybe it's just what got pulled off a comet as it came through."

"Can we get any closer?" Schmidt asked. "To the one near where the *Polk* was, I mean."

"Sure," Wilson said, and swooped the view in closer. The yellow debris sphere expanded and then disappeared, replaced by tiny points of light. "Those represent individual reflective objects," Wilson said.

"There are a lot of them," Schmidt said. "Which suggests to me they were part of a ship."

"Okay," Wilson said. "But here's the thing. The data suggests that none of these bits of matter are much larger than your head. Most of it is the size of gravel. Even if you add them all up, they don't come close to equaling an entire CDF frigate in mass."

"Maybe whoever did this to the *Polk* didn't want to leave evidence," Schmidt said.

"Now you're being paranoid," Wilson said.

"Hey," Schmidt said.

"No—" Wilson held up a hand. "I mean that as a compliment. And I think you're exactly right. Whoever did in the *Polk* wanted to make it difficult for us to find out what happened to it."

"If we could get to that debris field, we could take samples," Schmidt said.

"No time," Wilson said. "And right now finding what happened to the *Polk* is the means to an end. We still have to be reasonably sure this is what's left of the *Polk,* though. So how do we do that?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Schmidt said.

"Think, Hart," Wilson said. He waved at the monitor image. "What happened to the *rest* of the *Polk*?"

"It probably got vaporized," Schmidt said.

"Right," Wilson said, and waited.

"Okay," Schmidt said. "So?"

Wilson sighed. “You were raised by a tribe of chimps, weren’t you, Hart?” he asked.

“I didn’t know I’d be taking a *science test* today, Harry,” Schmidt said, annoyed.

“You *said* it already,” Wilson said. “The ship was probably vaporized. Whoever did this to the *Polk* took the time to cut, slice and blast into molecules most of it. But they probably didn’t cart all the atoms off with them.”

Schmidt’s eyes widened. “A big cloud of vaporized *Polk,*” he said.

“You got it,” Wilson said, and the display changed to show a large, amorphous blob, tentacles stretching out from the main body.

“That’s the ship?” Schmidt asked, looking at the blob.

“I’d say yes,” Wilson said. “One of the extra scans I had Captain Coloma run was a spectrographic analysis of the local neighborhood. It’s not a scan we’d usually do.”

“Why not?” Schmidt asked.

“Why would we?” Wilson said. “Searching your immediate environment for molecule-sized bits of frigate isn’t a standard protocol. Spectrographic analysis is usually reserved for science missions where someone’s sampling atmospheric gases. Spaceships themselves typically don’t have to be concerned with gases unless we’re near a planet and we have to figure out how far out the atmosphere extends. And with systems we’ve already surveyed, all that information is already in the database. I’m guessing whoever did this probably knew all of that. They weren’t concerned that an invisible cloud of metallic atoms would give them away.”

“They didn’t think we’d see it,” Schmidt said.

“And normally they’d be right,” Wilson said, and pulled out the view to capture all the other debris fields. “None of the other debris fields show the same density of molecular particles, and what particles there are aren’t the same sorts of metals we use to make our ships.” He pulled the view in again. “So this is almost certainly what’s left of the

Polk, and it was almost certainly intentionally attacked and methodically destroyed."

"Which means that someone leaked the information," Schmidt said. "This mission was meant to be secret."

Wilson nodded. "Yes, but that's not anything you and I have to worry about at the moment. We're still looking for the black box. The good news, if you want to call it that, is that this narrows down considerably the volume of space we need to search."

"So we go back to the first scan and start picking through those remaining bits of the *Polk,*" Schmidt said.

"We *could* do that," Wilson said. "If we had a month."

"This is where you make me look stupid again, isn't it," Schmidt said.

"No, I'm going to spare you this time because the answer isn't obvious," Wilson said.

"That's a relief," Schmidt said.

"To go back to your suggestion, even if we did go through the earlier scans, we'd be unlikely to come up with anything," Wilson said. "Remember that the CDF wants the black box to be found only by its own people."

"That's why the black box is black," Schmidt said.

"Not just black, but aggressively nonreflective," Wilson said. "Covered with a fractal coating that absorbs most radiation that hits it and scatters the rest of it. Sweep it with a sensor scan and nothing comes back directly. From the point of view of a sensor array, it doesn't exist."

"All right, Harry Wilson, supergenius," Schmidt said. "If you can't see it and can't sweep for it, then how do you find it?"

"I'm glad you asked," Wilson said. "When I was thinking about the black box, my brain wandered to the phrase 'black body.' It's an idealized physical object that absorbs every bit of radiation thrown at it."

"Like you said this thing does," Schmidt said.

"Sort of," Wilson said. "The black box is not a perfect black body; nothing is. But it reminded me that any object in the real world that absorbed all the radiation thrown at it would heat up. And then I remembered that the black box came equipped with a battery to power its processor and inertial dampener. And that the battery is not one hundred percent efficient."

Schmidt looked at Wilson blankly.

"It's *warm,* Hart," Wilson said. "The black box had a power source. That power source leaked heat. That heat kept it relatively warm long after everything else around it entropied itself into equilibrium."

"The battery is dead," Schmidt said. "Even if it was warm, it wouldn't be anymore."

"That depends on your definition of 'warm,'" Wilson said. "The design of the black box means that it has some areas inside of it acting like insulators. Even if the battery's dead, it'll take longer for the black box to reach a temperature equilibrium with space than it would if it were a solid shard of metal. I don't need it to be warm like the inside of this room, Hart. I just need it to be a fraction of a degree warmer than everything else around it."

The display screen flickered and the ghostly blob of attenuated *Polk* molecules was replaced by a thermal map that was a deep blue-black. Wilson gave the thermal map his attention.

"So you're looking for something that's ever so slightly above absolute zero," Schmidt said.

"Space is actually a couple of degrees above absolute zero," Wilson said. "Particularly inside a planetary system."

"Seems like an irrelevant detail," Schmidt said.

"And you call yourself a scientist," Wilson said.

"No, I don't," Schmidt said.

"Good thing, then," Wilson said.

"So what happens if it has entropied out?" Schmidt said. "If it's the same temperature as everything else around it?"

"Well, then, we're screwed," Wilson said.

"I don't love your bracing honesty," Schmidt said.

"Ha!" Wilson said, and suddenly the image in the display pitched inward, falling vertiginously toward something that was invisible until almost the last second, and was an only slightly lighter blue-black than everything around it even then.

"Is that it?" Schmidt asked.

"Let me change the false color temperature scale," Wilson said. The object, spherical, suddenly blossomed green.

"That's the black box," Schmidt said.

"It's the right size and shape," Wilson said. "If it's not the black box, the universe is messing with us. There are some other warmer objects out there, but they're not the right size profile."

"What are they?" Schmidt asked.

Wilson shrugged. "Possibly chunks of the *Polk* with sealed pockets of air in them. Right now, don't know, don't care." He pointed at the sphere. "This is what we came for."

Schmidt peered closely at the image. "How much warmer is it than everything around it?" he asked.

"Point zero zero three degrees Kelvin," Wilson said. "Another hour or two and we would never have found it."

"Don't tell me that," Schmidt said. "It makes me retroactively nervous."

"Science is built on tiny variances, my friend," Wilson said.

"So now what?" Schmidt asked.

"Now I get to tell Captain Coloma to warm up the shuttle, and you get to tell your boss that if this mission fails, it will be because of her, not us," Wilson said.

"I think I'll avoid putting it that way," Schmidt said.

"That's why you're the diplomat," Wilson said.

VII.

The discussion with Captain Coloma was not entirely pleasant. She demanded a rundown of the protocol used to locate the black box, which Wilson provided, quickly, his eye on the clock. Wilson suspected the captain hadn't expected him to locate the black box within the time allotted to him and was nonplussed when he had, and was now trying to manufacture a reason not to let him at the shuttle. In the end she couldn't manufacture one, although for security reasons, she said, she didn't release the shuttle pilot. Wilson wondered, if something bad happened to the shuttle while it was in his possession, what good it would do to have a shuttle pilot on board the *Clarke*. But in this as in many things, he let it go, smiled, saluted, and then thanked the captain for her cooperation.

The shuttle was designed for transport rather than for retrieval, which meant that Wilson would have to do some improvisation. One of the improvisations would include opening the interior of the shuttle to the hard vacuum of space, which was a prospect that did not excite Wilson, for several reasons. He pored over the shuttle specifications to see whether the thing could handle such an event; the *Clarke* was a diplomatic rather than a military ship, which meant it and everything in it had been constructed in civilian shipyards and possibly on different plans from those of the military ships and shuttles Wilson had become used to. Fortunately, Wilson discovered, the diplomatic shuttle, while its interior was designed with civilian needs in mind, shared the same chassis and construction as its military counterparts. A little hard vacuum wouldn't kill it.

The same could not be said for Wilson. Vacuum would kill him, although more slowly than it would anyone else on the *Clarke*. Wilson had been out of combat for years, but he was still a member of the Colonial Defense Forces and still had the genetic and other improvements given to soldiers, including SmartBlood, artificial blood that carried more oxygen and allowed his body to survive significantly longer without breathing than that of an unmodified human. When Wilson first arrived on the *Clarke,* one of his icebreaker tricks with the

diplomatic staff had been holding his breath while they clocked him with a timer; they usually got bored when he hit the five-minute mark.

Be that as it may, there was a manifest difference between holding one's breath in the *Clarke*'s lounge and staying conscious while airless, cold vacuum surrounded you as the air in your body was trying to burst out of your lungs and into space. A little protection was in order.

Which is how, for the first time in more than a dozen years, Wilson found himself in his standard-issue Colonial Defense Forces combat unitard.

"That's a new look," Schmidt said, smiling, as Wilson walked toward the shuttle.

"That's enough out of you," Wilson said.

"I don't think I've ever seen you in one of those things," Schmidt said. "I didn't even know you had one."

"Regulations require active-duty CDF to travel with a combat unitard even on noncombat postings," Wilson said. "On the theory it's a hostile universe and we should be prepared at all times to kill anyone we meet."

"It's an interesting philosophy," Schmidt said. "Where's your gun?"

"It's not a *gun,*" Wilson said. "It's an MP-35. And I left it in my storage locker. I don't really anticipate having to *shoot* the black box."

"A dicey risk," Schmidt said.

"When I want a military assessment from you, Hart, I'll be sure to let you know," Wilson said.

Schmidt smiled again and then held up what he was carrying. "Maybe this will be to your liking, then," he said. "CDF-issue hard connector with battery."

"Thanks," Wilson said. The black box was dead; he'd need to put a little power into it in order to wake up the transmitter.

"Are you ready to fly this thing?" Schmidt asked, nodding toward the shuttle.

"I've already plotted a path to the black box, and put it into the router," Wilson said. "There's also a standard departure routine. I've

chained the departure routine to the predetermined path. Reverse everything on the way home. As long as I'm not required to actually try to pilot, I'll be fine."

• • •

What the hell? Wilson thought. On his shuttle's forward monitor, on which he had pumped up light-source collection to see star patterns over the glare of his instrument panel, another star had become occluded. That was two in the last thirty seconds. There was some object in the path between him and the black box.

He frowned, powered the shuttle into motionlessness, and pulled up the data from the surveys he'd run on the *Clarke*.

He saw the object on the survey; another one of the debris chunks that had been ever so slightly warmer than the surrounding space. It was large enough that if the shuttle collided with it, there would be damage.

Looks like I have to pilot after all, Wilson thought. He was annoyed with himself that he hadn't applied his survey data to his shuttle plot; he now had to waste time replotting his course.

"Is there a problem?" Schmidt asked, voice coming through the instrument panel.

"Everything's fine," Wilson said. "Something in my way. Routing around it." The survey heat data noted the object's size as approximately three to four meters on a side, which made it considerably larger than anything that the standard scans had picked up, but not so large that it required a major change in pathing. Wilson created a new path that dropped the shuttle 250 meters below the object and resumed travel to the black box from there, and he inserted it into the navigational router, which accepted the change without complaint. Wilson resumed his journey, watching the monitors to see the object in his way occlude a few other stars as the shuttle moved relative to it.

The shuttle arrived at the black box a few moments later. Wilson couldn't see it with his own eyes, but after he had first located it he'd run supplementary scans that fixed its location to within about ten centimeters, which was precise enough for what he was about to do. He fired up the final navigational sequence, which made a series of minute maneuvers. This took another minute.

"Here we go," Wilson said, and commanded his unitard to wrap around his face, which it did with a snap. Wilson hated the feeling of the unitard's face mask; it felt as if someone had tightly duct-taped his entire head. It was simply better than the alternative in this case. Wilson's vision was totally blocked by his face mask; his BrainPal compensated by feeding him a visual stream.

That accomplished, Wilson commanded the shuttle to air out the interior. The shuttle's compressors sprang to life, sucking the shuttle's air back into its tanks. Three minutes later, the interior of the shuttle had almost as little open air in it as the space surrounding it.

Wilson cut off the shuttle's artificial gravity, unstrapped himself from the shuttle pilot chair and very gingerly pushed off toward the shuttle door, stopping himself directly in front of it and gripping the guide handle on its side to keep himself from drifting. He pressed the door release, and the door slid into the wall of the shuttle. There was an almost imperceptible whisper as the few remaining free molecules of human-friendly atmosphere rushed out the open portal.

Still holding the guide handle, Wilson reached out into space—gently!—and after a second wrapped his fingers around an object. He pulled it in.

It was the black box.

Excellent, Wilson thought, and released the guide handle to press the door button and seal the interior of the shuttle once more. He commanded the shuttle to start pumping air back into the cabin and to turn the artificial gravity back on—and nearly dropped the black box when he did. It was heavier than it looked.

After a minute, Wilson retracted his face mask and took a physically unnecessary but psychologically satisfying huge gulp of air. He walked back to the pilot's chair, retrieved the hard connector and then spent several minutes looking at the box's inscrutable surface, searching for the tiny hole he could plunge the connector into. He finally located it, lanced the box with the connector, felt it click into position, and waited the thirty required seconds for enough energy to transfer over and power up the black box's receiver and transmitter.

With his BrainPal, he transmitted the encrypted signal to the black box. There was a pause, followed by a stream of information pushed into Wilson's BrainPal fast enough that he almost felt it physically.

The last moments of the *Polk*.

Wilson started scanning the information with his BrainPal as quickly as he could begin opening the data.

In less than a minute, he confirmed what they already strongly suspected: that the *Polk* had been attacked and destroyed in the battle.

A minute after that, he learned that one escape pod had been launched from the *Polk* but that it appeared to have been destroyed less than ten seconds before the black box itself had been launched, cutting out its own data feed. Wilson guessed that the occupant of the escape pod would have been the mission ambassador or someone on her staff.

Three minutes after that, he learned something else.

"Oh shit," Wilson said, out loud.

"I just heard an 'Oh shit,'" Schmidt said, from the instrument panel.

"Hart, you need to get Abumwe and Coloma on the line, right now," Wilson said.

"The ambassador's in her preparatory briefings right now," Schmidt said. "She's not going to want to be interrupted."

"She's going to be a lot more upset with you if you don't interrupt her," Wilson said. "Trust me on this."

• • •

"The *Polk* was attacked by what?" Abumwe said. She and Coloma were tied into a conference video, Coloma from her ready room and Abumwe from a spare conference room Schmidt had almost had to drag her into.

"By at least fifteen Melierax Series Seven ship-to-ship missiles," Wilson said, talking into the pilot instrument panel and the small camera there. "It could have been more, because data started getting sketchy after enough systems failed. But it was at least fifteen."

"Why does it matter what type of missiles destroyed the *Polk*?" Abumwe asked, irritated.

Wilson glanced over to the image of Captain Coloma, who looked ashen. She got it, at least. "Because, Ambassador, Melierax Series Seven ship-to-ship missiles are made by the Colonial Union," Wilson said. "The *Polk* was attacked with our own missiles."

"That's not possible," Abumwe said, after a moment.

"The data says otherwise," Wilson said, choosing not to go on a rant about the stupidity of the phrase "that's not possible," because it would likely be counterproductive at this point.

"The data could be incorrect," Abumwe said.

"With respect, Ambassador, the CDF has gotten very good at figuring out what things are being shot at them," Wilson said. "If the *Polk* confirmed the missiles as being Melierax type, it's because it was able to identify them across several confirming points, including shape, size, scan profile, thrust signature and so on. The likelihood of them not being Melierax Series Seven is small."

"What do we know about the ship?" Coloma said. "The one that fired on the *Polk*."

"Not a lot," Wilson said. "It didn't identify itself, and other than a basic scan the *Polk* didn't spend any time on it. It was roughly the same size as the *Polk* itself, we can see that from its survey signature. Other than that, there's not much to go on."

"Did the *Polk* fire back on the ship?" Coloma asked.

"It got off at least four missiles," Wilson said. "Also Melierax Series Seven. There's no data on whether they hit their target."

"I don't understand," Abumwe said. "Why would we attack and destroy one of our own ships?"

"We don't know if it was one of our own ships," Coloma said. "Just that it was our own missiles."

"That's right," Wilson said, and raised his finger to rebut.

"It's possible that we sold the missiles to another race," Coloma said. "Who then attacked us."

"It's possible, but there are two things to consider here," Wilson said. "The first is that most of our weapon trades are for higher-end technology. Any one race who can make a spaceship can make a missile. The Melierax Series are bread-and-butter missiles. Every other race has missiles just like it. The second is that these are ostensibly secret negotiations. In order to hit us, someone had to know we were here." Coloma opened her mouth. "And to anticipate the next question, we haven't sold any Melierax missiles to the Utche," Wilson said. Coloma closed her mouth and stared stonily.

"So we have a mystery ship targeting the Colonial Union with our own missiles," Abumwe said.

"Yes," Wilson said.

"Then where are they now?" Abumwe said. "Why aren't *we* under attack?"

"They didn't know *we* were coming," Wilson said. "We were diverted to this mission at the last minute. It would usually take the Colonial Union several days at least to have a new mission in place. By which time these particular negotiations would have failed, because we weren't there for them."

"Someone destroyed an entire ship just to foul up diplomatic negotiations?" Coloma said. "This is your theory?"

"It's a guess," Wilson said. "I don't pretend that I know enough about this situation to be correct. But I think regardless we have to make the Colonial Union aware of what happened here as soon as

possible. Captain, I've already transferred the data to the *Clarke*'s computers. I strongly suggest we send a skip drone with it and my preliminary analysis back to Phoenix immediately."

"Agreed," Abumwe said.

"I'll have it done as soon as I'm off this call," Coloma said. "Now, Lieutenant, I want you and the shuttle back on the *Clarke* immediately. With all due respect to Ambassador Abumwe, I'm not entirely convinced there's not still a threat out there. Get back here. We'll be under way as soon as you are."

"What?" Abumwe said. "We still have a mission. I still have a mission. We're here to negotiate with the Utche."

"Ambassador, the *Clarke* is a diplomatic vessel," Coloma said. "We have no offensive weapons and only a bare minimum of defensive capability. We've confirmed the *Polk* was attacked. It's possible whoever attacked the *Polk* is still out there. We're sending this data to Phoenix. They will alert the Utche of the situation, which means they will almost certainly call off their ship. There is no negotiation to be had."

"You don't know that," Abumwe said. "It might take them hours to process the information. We are less than three hours from when the Utche are meant to arrive. Even if we were to leave, we will still be in system when they arrive, which means the first thing they would see is us running away."

"It's not *running away,*" Coloma said, sharply. "And this is not your decision to make, Ambassador. I am captain of the ship."

"A diplomatic ship," Abumwe said. "On which I am the chief diplomat."

"Ambassador, Captain," Wilson said, "do I need to be here for this part of the conversation?"

Wilson saw the two simultaneously reach toward their screens. Both of their images shut off.

"That would be 'no,'" Wilson said, to himself.

VIII.

Something was nagging at Wilson as he punched in the return route to the *Clarke*. The *Polk* had been hit at least fifteen times by ship-to-ship missiles, but before any of them had hit, there had been an earlier explosion that had shaken the ship. But the data had not recorded any event leading up to the explosion; the ship had skipped, made an initial scan of the immediate area and then everything was perfectly normal until the initial explosion. Once it happened everything went to hell, quickly. But beforehand, nothing. There had been nothing to indicate anything out of the ordinary.

The shuttle's navigational router accepted the path back and started to move. Wilson strapped himself into his seat and relaxed. He would be back on the *Clarke* shortly, by which time he assumed that either Coloma or Abumwe would have emerged victorious from their power struggle. Wilson had no personal preference in who won; he could see the merit in both arguments, and both of them appeared to dislike him equally, so neither had an advantage there.

I did what I was supposed to do, Wilson thought, and glanced over to the black box on the passenger seat, looking like a dark, matte, light-absorbing hole in the chair.

Something clicked in his head.

"Holy shit," Wilson said, and slapped the shuttle into immobility.

"You said 'shit' again," Wilson heard Schmidt say. "And now you're not moving."

"I just had a very interesting thought," Wilson said.

"You can't have this thought while you are bringing the shuttle back?" Schmidt said. "Captain Coloma was very specific about returning it."

"Hart, I'm going to talk to you in a bit," Wilson said.

"What are you going to do?" Schmidt asked.

"You probably don't want to know," Wilson said. "It's best you don't know. I want to make sure you have plausible deniability."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Schmidt said.

"Exactly," Wilson said, and cut his connection to his friend.

A few minutes later, Wilson floated weightless inside the airless cabin of the shuttle, face masked, holding the guide handle next to the shuttle door. He slapped the door release button.

And saw nothing outside.

Which is not as it should have been; Wilson's BrainPal should have picked up and enhanced starlight within visible wavelengths. He was getting nothing.

Wilson reached out with the hand not gripping the guide handle. Nothing. He repositioned himself, bringing his body mostly outside of the door, and reached again. This time there was something there.

Something big and black and invisible.

Hello, Wilson thought. *What the hell are you?*

The big, black, invisible thing did not respond.

Wilson pinged his BrainPal for two things. The first was to see how long it had been since his face mask had gone on; it was roughly two minutes. He'd have just about five minutes before his body started screaming at him for air. The second was to adjust the properties of the nanobotic cloth of his combat unitard to run a slight electric current through his unitard's hands, soles and knees, the current powered by his own body heat and friction generated through movement. That achieved, he reached out again toward the big, black, invisible object.

His hand clung to it, lightly. *Hooray for magnetism,* Wilson thought.

Moving slowly so as not to accidentally and fatally launch himself into space, Wilson left the shuttle to go exploring.

• • •

"We have a problem," Wilson said. He was back on the conference call with Coloma and Abumwe. Schmidt hovered behind Abumwe, silent.

"*You* have a problem," Coloma said. "You were ordered to return that shuttle forty minutes ago."

"We have a *different* problem," Wilson said. "I've found a missile out here. It's armed. It's waiting for the Utche. And it's one of ours."

"Excuse me?" Coloma said, after a moment.

"It's another Melierax Series Seven," Wilson said, and held up the black box. "It's housed in a small silo that's covered in the same wavelength-absorbing material this thing is. When you run the standard scans, you won't see it. Hart and I only saw it because we ran a highly-sensitive thermal scan when we were looking for the black box, and even then we didn't give it any thought because it wasn't what we were looking for. When I was looking through the *Polk* data, there was an explosion that seemed to come out of nowhere, before the *Polk* was attacked by the ship and missiles we could see. My brain put two and two together. I passed by this thing on the way to black box. I stopped this time to get a closer look."

"You said it's waiting for the Utche," Abumwe said.

"Yes," Wilson said.

"How do you know that?" Abumwe asked.

"I hacked into the missile," Wilson said. "I got inside the silo, pried open the missile control panel and then used this." He held up the CDF standard connector.

"You went on a *spacewalk*?" Schmidt said, over Abumwe's shoulder. "Are you completely *insane*?"

"I went on three," Wilson said as Abumwe turned to glare at Schmidt. "I was limited by how long I could hold my breath."

"You hacked into the missile," Coloma said, returning to the subject.

"Right," Wilson said. "The missile is armed and it's waiting for a signal from the Utche ship."

"What signal?" Coloma asked.

"I think it's when the Utche ship hails us," Wilson said. "The Utche send their ship-to-ship communications on certain frequencies, different from the ones we typically use. This missile is programmed to

home in on ships using those frequencies. Ergo, it's waiting for the Utche."

"To what end?" Abumwe asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Wilson said. "The Utche are attacked by a Colonial Defense Forces missile, and are damaged or destroyed. The original Colonial Union diplomatic mission was traveling by CDF frigate. It would look like we attacked the Utche. Negotiations broken off, diplomacy over, the Colonial Union and the Utche back at each other's throats."

"But the *Polk* was destroyed," Coloma said.

"I've been thinking about that," Wilson said. "The information I was sent by the CDF about the *Polk*'s mission said it was slated to arrive seventy-four hours prior to the scheduled Utche arrival. The black box data stream has the *Polk* arriving eighty hours prior to the scheduled Utche arrival."

"You think they arrived early and caught someone setting the trap," Coloma said.

"I don't know about 'caught,'" Wilson said. "I think whoever it was was in the process of setting the trap and then was surprised by the *Polk*'s arrival."

"You just said these things were looking for the Utche," Abumwe said. "But it sounds like one of them hit the *Polk,* too."

"If the people setting the trap were nearby, it would be trivial to change the programming of the missile," Wilson said. "It's set to receive. And once the thing hit the *Polk,* it would be too busy focusing on that to pay much attention when a strange ship popped up on its sensors. Until it was too late."

"The early arrival of the *Polk* ruined their plans," Coloma said. "Why is this thing still out there?"

"I think it *changed* their plans," Wilson said. "They had to kill the *Polk* when it arrived early, and they had to get rid of as much of it as possible to leave in doubt what happened to it. But as long as there's enough CDF missile debris among the wreckage of the Utche ship,

then mission accomplished. Having the *Polk* go missing works just fine with that, since it looks like the CDF is hiding the ship, rather than presenting it to prove the missiles didn't come from it."

"But we know what happened to the *Polk,*" Abumwe said.

"*They* don't know that," Wilson pointed out. "Whoever they are. We're the wild card in the deck. And it doesn't change the fact that the Utche are still a target."

"Have you disabled the missile?" Coloma asked.

"No," Wilson said. "I was able to read the missile's instruction set, but I can't do anything to change it. I'm locked out of that. And I don't have any tools with me that can disable it. But even if I disabled this one, there are others out there. Hart's and my heat map shows four more of these things out there beside this one. We have less than an hour before the Utche are scheduled to arrive. There's no way to physically disable them in time."

"So we're helpless to stop the attack," Abumwe said.

"No, wait," Coloma said. "You said there's no way to *physically* disable them. Do you have another way to disable them?"

"I think I might have a way to destroy them," Wilson said.

"Tell us," Coloma said.

"You're not going to like it," Wilson said.

"Will I like it better than us standing by while the Utche are attacked and then we are framed for it?" Coloma said.

"I'd like to think so," Wilson said.

"Then tell us," Coloma said.

"It involves the shuttle," Wilson said.

Coloma threw up her hands. "Of course it does," she said.

IX.

"Here—" Schmidt thrust a small container and a mask into Wilson's hands. "Supplementary oxygen. For a normal person that's about twenty minutes' worth. I don't know what that would be for you."

"About two hours," Wilson said. "More than enough time. And the other thing?"

"I got it," Schmidt said, and held up another object, not much larger than the oxygen container. "High-density, quick-discharge battery. Straight from the engine room. It required the direct intervention of Captain Coloma, by the way. Chief Engineer Basquez was not pleased to be relieved of it."

"If everything goes well, he'll have it back soon," Wilson said.

"And if everything doesn't go well?" Schmidt asked.

"Then we'll all have bigger problems, won't we," Wilson said.

They both looked at the shuttle, which Wilson was about to reenter after a brief pit stop in the *Clarke*'s bay.

"You really are insane, you know that," Schmidt said, after a moment.

"I always think it's funny when people get told what they are by other people," Wilson said. "As if they didn't already know."

"We could just set the autopilot on the shuttle," Schmidt said. "Send it out that way."

"We *could,*" Wilson said. "If a shuttle was like a mechanical vehicle you could send on its way by tying a brick to its accelerator pedal. But it's not. It's designed to have a human at the controls. Even on autopilot."

"You could alter the programming on the shuttle," Schmidt said.

"We have roughly fifteen minutes before the Utche arrive," Wilson said. "I appreciate the vote of confidence in my skills, but no. There's no time. And we need to do more than just send it out, anyway."

"Insane," Schmidt reiterated.

"Relax, Hart," Wilson said. "For my sake. You're making me twitchy."

"Sorry," Schmidt said.

"It's all right," Wilson said. "Now, tell me what you're going to do after I leave."

"I'm going to the bridge," Schmidt said. "If you're not successful for any reason, I will have the *Clarke* send out a message on our frequencies warning the Utche of the trap, to *not* confirm the message or to broadcast anything on their native communication bands, and request that they get the hell out of Danavar space as quickly as possible. I'm to invoke your security clearance to the captain if there are any problems."

"That's very good," Wilson said.

"Thank you for the virtual pat on the head, there," Schmidt said.

"I do it out of love," Wilson assured him.

"Right," Schmidt said dryly, and then looked over at the shuttle again. "Do you think this is actually going to work?" he asked.

"I look at it this way," Wilson said. "Even if it doesn't work, we have proof we did everything we could to stop the attack on the Utche. That's going to count for something."

• • •

Wilson entered the shuttle, fired up the launch sequence and while it was running took the high-density battery and connected it to the *Polk*'s black box. The battery immediately started draining into the black box's own power storage.

"Here we go," Wilson said for the second time that day. The shuttle eased out of the *Clarke*'s bay.

Schmidt had been right: This all would have been a lot easier if the shuttle could have been piloted remotely. There was no physical bar to it; humans had been remote-piloting vehicles for centuries. But the Colonial Union insisted on a human pilot for transport shuttles for roughly the same reason the Colonial Defense Forces required a BrainPal signal to fire an Empee rifle: to make sure only the right people were using them, for the right purposes. Modifying the shuttle flight software to take the human presence out of the equation would not only require a substantial amount of time, but would also technically be classified as treason.

Wilson preferred not to engage in treason if he could avoid it. And so here he was, on the shuttle, about to do something stupid.

On the shuttle display, Wilson called up the heat map he'd created, and a timer. The heat map registered each of the suspect missile silos; the timer counted down until the scheduled arrival of the Utche, now less than ten minutes away. From the mission data given to Ambassador Abumwe, Wilson had a rough idea of where the Utche planned to skip into Danavar space. He plotted the shuttle in another direction entirely and opened up the throttle to put sufficient distance between himself and the *Clarke,* counting the kilometers until he reached what he estimated to be a good, safe distance.

Now for the tricky part, Wilson thought, and tapped his instrument panel to start broadcasting a signal on the Utche's communication bands.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," Wilson said to the missiles.

The missiles did not hear Wilson. They heard the shuttle's signal instead and erupted from their silos, one, two, three, four, five. Wilson saw them twice, first on the shuttle's monitor and second through the *Clarke*'s sensor data, ported into his BrainPal.

"Five missiles on you, locked and tracking," Wilson heard Schmidt say, through the instrument panel.

"Come on, let's play," Wilson said, and pushed the shuttle as fast as it would go. It was not as fast as the missiles could go, but that wasn't the point. The point was twofold. First, to get the missiles as far away from where the Utche would be as possible. Second, to get the missiles spaced so that the explosion from the first missile on the shuttle would destroy all the other missiles, moving too quickly to avoid being damaged.

To manage that, Wilson had broadcast his signal from a point as close to equidistant to all five silos as could be managed and still be a safe distance from the *Clarke*. If everything worked out correctly, the missile impacts would be within a second of each other.

Wilson looked at the missile tracks. So far, so good. He had roughly a minute before the first impact. More than enough time.

Wilson unstrapped himself from the pilot seat, picked up the oxygen container, secured it on his unitard combat belt and fastened the mask over his mouth and nose. He ordered his combat unitard to close over his face, sealing the mask in. He picked up the black box and pinged its charge status; it was at 80 percent, which Wilson guessed would have to be good enough. He disconnected it from the external battery and then walked to the shuttle door, carrying the black box in one hand and the battery in the other. He positioned himself at what he hoped was the right spot, took a very deep breath and chucked the battery at the door release button. It hit square on and the door slid open.

Explosive decompression sucked Wilson out the door a fraction of a second earlier than he expected. He missed braining himself on the still-opening door by about a millimeter.

Wilson tumbled away from the shuttle on the vector the decompressing air had placed him but kept pace with the shuttle in terms of its forward motion, a testament to fundamental Newtonian physics. This was going to be bad news in roughly forty seconds, when the first missile hit the shuttle; even without an atmosphere to create a shock wave that would turn his innards to jelly, Wilson could still be fried and punctured by shrapnel.

He looked down at the *Polk*'s black box, tightly gripped close to his abdomen, and sent it a signal that informed it that it had been ejected from a spaceship. Then, despite the fact that his visual feed was now being handled by his BrainPal, he closed his eyes to fight the vertigo of the stars wheeling haphazardly around him. The BrainPal, interpreting this correctly, cut off the outside feed and provided Wilson with a tactical display instead. Wilson waited.

Do your thing, baby, he thought to the black box.

The black box got the signal. Wilson felt a snap as the black box's inertial field factored his mass into its calculus and tightened around

him. On the tactical display coming from his BrainPal, Wilson saw the representation of the shuttle pull away from him with increasing speed, and saw the missiles flash by his position, their velocity increasing toward the shuttle even as his was decreasing. Within a few seconds, he had slowed sufficiently that he was no longer in immediate danger of the shuttle impact.

In all, his little plan had worked out reasonably well so far.

Let's still not ever do this again, Wilson said to himself.

Agreed, himself said back.

"First impact in ten seconds," Wilson heard Schmidt say, via his BrainPal. Wilson had his BrainPal present him with a stabilized, enhanced visual of outside space and watched as the now invisible missiles bore down on the hapless, also invisible shuttle.

There was a series of short, sharp light bursts, like tiny firecrackers going off two streets away.

"Impact," Schmidt said. Wilson smiled.

"Shit," Schmidt said. Wilson stopped smiling and snapped up his BrainPal tactical display.

The shuttle and four of the missiles had been destroyed. One missile had survived and was casting about for a target.

On the periphery of the tactical display, a new object appeared. It was the *Kaligm*. The Utche had arrived.

Send that message to the Utche NOW, Wilson subvocalized to Schmidt, and the BrainPal transmuted it to a reasonable facsimile of Wilson's own voice.

"Captain Coloma refuses," Schmidt said a second later.

What? Wilson sent. *Tell her it's an order. Invoke my security clearance. Do it now.*

"She says to shut up, you're distracting her," Schmidt said.

Distracting her from what? Wilson sent.

The *Clarke* started broadcasting a warning to the Utche, warning them of the missile attack, telling them to be silent and to leave Danavar space.

On the Utche's broadcast bands.

The last missile locked on and thrust itself toward the *Clarke*.

Oh, God, Wilson thought, and his BrainPal sent the thought to Schmidt.

"Thirty seconds to impact," Schmidt said.

"Twenty seconds …

"Ten …

"This is it, Harry."

Silence.

X.

Wilson estimated he had fifteen minutes of air left when the Utche shuttle sidled up to his position and opened an outside airlock for him. On the inside, a space-suited Utche guided him in, closed the airlock and, when the air cycle had finished, opened the inner seal to the shuttle. Wilson unsealed his head, took off the oxygen mask, inhaled and then suppressed his gag reflex. Utche did not smell particularly wonderful to humans. He looked up and saw several Utche looking at him curiously.

"Hi," he said, to no one of them in particular.

"Are you well?" one of them asked, in a voice that sounded as if it were being spoken while inhaling.

"I'm fine," Wilson said. "How is the *Clarke*?"

"You are asking of your ship," said another, in a similar inward-breathing voice.

"Yes," Wilson said.

"It is most damaged," said the first one.

"Are there dead?" Wilson asked. "Are there injured?"

"You are a soldier," the second one said. "May you understand our language? It would be easier to say there."

Wilson nodded and booted up the Utche translation routine he'd received with the *Clarke*'s new orders. "Speak your own language," he

said. “I will respond in mine.”

“I am Ambassador Suel,” the second one said. As the ambassador spoke, a second voice superimposed and spoke in English. “We don’t yet know the extent of the damage to your ship or the casualties because we only just now reestablished communication, and that through an emergency transmitter on the *Clarke*. When we reestablished contact we intended to offer assistance and to bring your crew onto our ship. But Ambassador Abumwe insisted that we must first retrieve you before we came to the *Clarke*. She was most insistent.”

“As I was about to run out of oxygen, I appreciate her insistence,” Wilson said.

“I am Sub-Ambassador Dorb,” said the first Utche. “Would you tell us how you came to be floating out here in space without a ship around you?”

“I had a ship,” Wilson said. “It was eaten by a school of missiles.”

“I am afraid I don’t understand what you mean by that,” Dorb said, after a glance to his (her? its?) boss.

“I will be happy to explain,” Wilson said. “I would be even happier to explain on the way to the *Clarke*.”

• • •

Abumwe, Coloma and Schmidt, as well as the majority of the *Clarke*’s diplomatic mission, were on hand when the Utche shuttle door irised open and Ambassadors Suel and Dorb exited, with Wilson directly behind.

“Ambassador Suel,” Abumwe said, and a device attached to a lanyard translated for her. She bowed. “I am Ambassador Ode Abumwe. I apologize for the lack of live translator.”

“Ambassador Abumwe,” Suel said in his own language, and returned the bow. “No apology is needed. Your Lieutenant Wilson has very quickly briefed us on how it is you have come to be here in place of Ambassador Bair, and what you and the crew of the *Clarke* have

done on our behalf. We will of course have to confirm the data for ourselves, but in the meantime I wish to convey our gratitude."

"Your gratitude is appreciated but not required," Abumwe said. "We have done only what was necessary. As to the data"—Abumwe nodded to Schmidt, who came forward and presented a data card to Dorb—"on that data card you will find both the black box recordings of the *Polk* and all the data recorded by us since we arrived in Danavar space. We wish to be open and direct with you and leave no doubt of our intentions or deeds during these negotiations."

Wilson blinked at this; black box data and the *Clarke* data records were almost certainly classified materials. Abumwe was taking a hell of a risk offering them up to the Utche prior to a signed treaty. He glanced at Abumwe, whose expression was unreadable; whatever else she was, she was in full diplomatic mode now.

"Thank you, Ambassador," Suel said. "But I wonder if we should not suspend these negotiations for the time being. Your ship is damaged and you undoubtedly have casualties among your crew. Your focus should be on your own people. We would of course stand ready to assist."

Captain Coloma stepped forward and saluted Suel. "Captain Sophia Coloma," she said. "Welcome to the *Clarke,* Ambassador."

"Thank you, Captain," the ambassador said.

"Ambassador, the *Clarke* is damaged and will require repair, but her life support and energy systems are stable," Coloma said. "We had a brief time to model and prepare for the missile strike and because of it were able to sustain the strike with minimal casualties and no deaths. While we will welcome your assistance, particularly with our communications systems, at this point we are in no immediate danger. Please do not let us be a hindrance to your negotiations."

"That is good to hear," Suel said. "Even so—"

"Ambassador, if I may," Abumwe said. "The crew of the *Clarke* risked everything, including their own lives, so that you and your crew might be safe and that we might secure this treaty. This man on my

staff"—Abumwe nodded toward Wilson—"let four missiles chase him down and escaped death by throwing himself out of a shuttle and into the cold vacuum of space. It would be disrespectful of us to allow their efforts to be repaid with a *postponement* of our work."

Suel and Dorb looked over to Wilson, as if to get his thought on the matter. Wilson glanced over to Abumwe, who was expressionless.

"Well, I sure as hell don't want to have to come back here again," he said, to Suel and Dorb.

Suel and Dorb stared at him for a moment, and then made a sound that Wilson's BrainPal translated as [laughter].

• • •

Twenty minutes later, the Utche shuttle left the *Clarke* with Abumwe and her diplomatic team aboard. From the shuttle bay control room, Coloma, Wilson and Schmidt watched it depart.

"Thank Christ that's over," Coloma said, as it cleared the bay. She pivoted to return to the bridge, without looking at Wilson or Schmidt.

"The ship's not really secure, is it," Wilson said, to her back.

"Of course it's not," she said, turning back. "The only true thing I said was that we had no deaths, although it's probably more accurate to say that we don't have any deaths *yet*. As for the rest of it, our life support and energy systems are hanging by a thread, most of the other systems are dead or failing, and it will be a miracle if the *Clarke* ever moves from this spot under her own power. And to top it all off, some idiot destroyed our shuttle."

"Sorry about that," Wilson said.

"Hmmm," Coloma said. She started to turn again.

"It was a very great thing, to risk your ship for the Utche," Wilson said. "I didn't ask you to do that. That came from you, Captain Coloma. It's a victory, if you ask me. Ma'am."

Coloma paused for a second and then walked off, with no response.

"I don't think she likes me much," Wilson said, to Schmidt.

"Your charm is best described as idiosyncratic," Schmidt said.

"So why do *you* like me?" Wilson said.

"I don't think I've actually ever admitted to liking you," Schmidt said.

"Now that you mention it, I think you may be right," Wilson said.

"You're not boring," Schmidt said.

"Which is what you like most about me," Wilson said.

"No, boring is good," Schmidt said, and waved his hand around the shuttle bay. "This is the shit that's going to kill me."

XI.

Colonel Abel Rigney and Colonel Liz Egan sat in a hole-in-the-wall commissary at Phoenix Station, eating cheeseburgers.

"These are fantastic cheeseburgers," Rigney said.

"They're even better when you have a genetically-engineered body that never gets fat," Egan said. She took another bite of her burger.

"True," Rigney said. "Maybe I'll have another."

"Do," Egan said. "Test your metabolism."

"So, you read the report," Rigney said to Egan between his own bites.

"All I do is read reports," Egan said. "Read reports and scare midlevel bureaucrats. Which report are we talking about?"

"The one on the final round of negotiations with the Utche," Rigney said. "With the *Clarke,* and Ambassador Abumwe and Lieutenant Wilson."

"I did," Egan said.

"What's the final disposition of the *Clarke*?" Rigney asked.

"What did you find out about those missile fragments?" Egan asked.

"I asked you first," Rigney said.

"And I'm not in the second grade, so that tactic doesn't work with me," Egan said, and took another bite.

"We took a chunk of missile your dockworkers fished out of the *Clarke* and found a part number on it. The missile tracks back to a frigate called the *Brainerd*. This particular missile was reported launched and destroyed in a live-fire training exercise eighteen months ago. All the data I've seen confirms the official story," Rigney said.

"So we have ghost missiles being used by mystery ships to undermine secret diplomatic negotiations," Egan said.

"That's about the size of it," Rigney said. He set down his burger.

"Secretary Galeano isn't going to be very pleased that one of our own missiles was used to severely damage one of her department's ships," Egan said.

"That's all right," Rigney said. "My bosses aren't very pleased that a mole in the Department of State told whoever was using our own missiles against your ship where that ship was going to be and with whom it was negotiating."

"You have evidence of that?" Egan asked.

"No," Rigney said. "But we have pretty good evidence that the Utche sprung no leaks. The process of elimination applies from there."

"I'd like to see that evidence about the Utche," Egan said.

"I'd like to show it to you," Rigney said. "But you have a mole problem."

Egan looked at Rigney narrowly. "You better smile when you say that, Abel," she said.

"To be clear," Rigney said, "I would—and *have,* you'll recall from our combat days—trust you with my life. It's not you I'm worried about. It's everyone else in your department. Someone with a high enough security clearance to know about the Utche talks is engaging in treason, Liz. Selling us out to our enemies. Which enemies, we don't know. But our *friends* don't blow up one of our ships and try to go after a second."

Egan said nothing to this, choosing to stab a fry into ketchup instead.

"Which brings us back to the *Clarke,*" Rigney said. "How is the ship?"

"We're trying to decide which will cost less, a complete rehaul or scrapping it and building a new ship," Egan said. "If we scrap it, at the very least we recoup the salvage value."

"That bad," Rigney said.

"The CDF makes excellent ship-to-ship missiles," Egan said. "Why do you ask?"

"For a B-team, Abumwe and her team were pretty impressive, don't you think?" Rigney said.

"They did all right," Egan said.

"Really," Rigney said, and held up a hand to start ticking off points on his fingers. "Wilson and Schmidt develop a new protocol for locating powerless CDF black boxes and retrieve data revealing what happened to the *Polk*. Then Wilson takes multiple spacewalks clad only in a CDF combat unitard and discovers a plan to destroy the Utche diplomatic mission with our missiles. He destroys four of those missiles and then Captain Coloma sacrifices her own ship to make sure the last missile doesn't hit the Utche. Coloma then flat-out lies to the Utche about the state of her ship to make sure Abumwe has a shot at the negotiations, and Abumwe basically strong-arms the Utche—the *Utche*—into completing their negotiations. Which they *do,* with only a day's preparation."

"They did all right," Egan said again.

"What more would you *like* them to do?" Rigney asked. "Walk on water?"

"Where is this going, Abel?" Egan asked.

"You said the most notable negotiation these folks did before this was another situation where they were forced to think on their feet and improvise," Rigney said. "Has it occurred to you that the reason Abumwe and her people are on your B-list is not because they're not good at what they do, but because you're not putting them in the right situations?"

"We didn't know these negotiations were going to be the 'right' situation," Egan said.

"No, but now you know what *are* the right situations for them," Rigney said. "High-risk, high-reward situations where the path to success isn't laid out but has to be cut by machetes through a jungle filled with poison toads."

"The poison toads are a nice touch," Egan said, reaching for another french fry.

"You see what I'm getting at," Rigney said.

"I do," Egan said. "But I'm not entirely sure I'm going to be able to convince the secretary that a bunch of B-listers is who she wants for high-risk, high-reward missions."

"Not all of them," Rigney said. "Just the ones where the usual diplomatic bullshit won't work."

"Why do you care?" Egan said. "You seem awfully passionate about a bunch of people you had no idea existed just a week ago."

"You say it yourself every time you scare your State Department middle managers," Rigney said. "We're running out of time. We don't have the Earth anymore, and we need more friends than we've got if we're going to survive. Part of that can be something like the *Clarke* crew already is—a fire team we parachute in when nothing else is working."

"And when they fail?" Egan said.

"Then they fail in a situation where failure is an expected outcome," Rigney said. "But if they succeed, then we're much better off."

"If we appoint them to be this 'fire team,' as you say, then we're already raising expectations for whatever they do," Egan said.

"There's a simple solution for that," Rigney said. "Don't tell them they're a fire team."

"How awfully cruel," Egan said.

Rigney shrugged. "Abumwe and her people are already aware that they're not at the grown-ups' table," he said. "Why do you think she browbeat the Utche into negotiations? She knows an opportunity when

she sees it. She wants those opportunities, and she and her team are going to beat their brains in to get them."

"And destroy their ships to get them, apparently," Egan said. "This fire team idea of yours could get expensive, fast."

"What's the plan for the *Clarke*'s crew?" Rigney asked.

"It hasn't been decided," Egan said. "We might put Abumwe and her diplomatic team on a different ship. Coloma's going to have to face an inquiry about intentionally putting her ship in the path of a missile. She's going to get cleared, but it's still a process. Wilson's on loan from CDF Research and Development. Presumably at some point they're going to want him back."

"Do you think you could put any decisions on the *Clarke*'s crew on hold for a few weeks?" Rigney asked.

"You seem awfully excited about these people," Egan said. "But even if I did put them in career limbo for your own amusement, there's no guarantee the secretary would sign off on your 'fire team' concept."

"Would it help if the CDF had a list of fires it would prefer to be put out through diplomacy than gunfire?" Rigney asked.

"Ah," Egan said. "*Now* we're getting to it. And I can already tell you how that idea's going to go over. When I first joined the secretary's team as CDF liaison, it took her six weeks to have a conversation with me longer than three words, all monosyllables. If I come to her with a list of requests from the CDF and a handpicked team, she'll communicate to me with grunts."

"All the more reason to use this team," Rigney said. "It's full of nobodies. She'll think she's screwing us. Tell her about the request and then suggest these people. It'll work brilliantly."

"Would you like me to ask her not to throw you in the briar patch while I'm at it?" Egan asked.

"Just this one request for now," Rigney said.

Egan was quiet for a few moments as she picked at her fries. Rigney finished his burger and waited.

"I'll take her temperature on it," Egan said, finally. "But if I were you, I wouldn't get my hopes up."

"I never get my hopes up," Rigney said. "It's how I've lived this long."

"And in the meantime I'll keep the *Clarke* crew from being reassigned elsewhere," Egan said.

"Thank you," Rigney said.

"You owe me," Egan said.

"Of course I do," Rigney said.

"Now I have to go," Egan said, pushing up from the table. "More children to scare."

"You have fun with that," Rigney said.

"You know I do," Egan said. She turned to go.

"Hey, Liz," Rigney said. "That estimate you give the kids, the one about humans having thirty years before we're extinct. How much exaggeration is in that?"

"Do you want the truth?" Egan asked.

"Yes," Rigney said.

"Almost none at all," Egan said. "If anything, it's optimistic."

She left. Rigney stared at the remains of their meal.

"Well, hell," he said. "If we're doomed, maybe I will have that second cheeseburger after all."

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EPISODE TWO

Walk the Plank

[Transcript Begins]

CHENZIRA EL-MASRI: —okay, I'm not really interested in who you have in the medical bay, Aurel. Right now I'm focused on finding those damn cargo containers. If we don't track those down, it's not going to be a very happy next few months around here.

AUREL SPURLEA: If I didn't think the two of them were related, I wouldn't be bothering you, Chen. Are you recording this, Magda?

MAGDA GANAS: Just started the recorder.

SPURLEA: Chen, the guy in the sick bay isn't from around here.

EL-MASRI: What do you mean, "not from around here"? We're a wildcat colony. It's not like there's anywhere else to be from around here.

SPURLEA: He says he's from the *Erie Morningstar*.

EL-MASRI: That doesn't make any sense. The *Erie Morningstar* isn't supposed to be landing anyone. It's supposed to be sending down the containers on autopilot. The whole point of doing it this way is to take humans out of it.

GANAS: We know that, Chen. We were there when the cargo schedules were drawn up, too. That's why you need to see this guy. No matter what else, he's not one of us. He's come from *somewhere*. And since the *Erie Morningstar* was supposed to deliver two days ago, and he's here today, it's not a bad guess that he's telling the truth when he says he's from there.

EL-MASRI: So you think he came down on one of the containers.

GANAS: It seems likely.

EL-MASRI: That wouldn't have been a fun ride.

SPURLEA: Here we are. Chen, a couple of things real quick. One, he's messed up physically and we have him on pain relievers.

EL-MASRI: I thought I gave orders—

SPURLEA: Before you bitch at me, we've watered them down as much as we can and still have them have any effect. But believe me, this guy needs *something*. Two, he's got the Rot in his leg.

EL-MASRI: How bad?

SPURLEA: Real bad. I cleaned it out best I can, but it's a pretty good chance it's in the bloodstream by now, and you know what that means. But he's not from around here and *he* doesn't know what that means, and I don't see much point in telling him at this point. My goal is to keep him coherent long enough for you to talk to him and then keep him from too much pain while we figure out what to do with him after that.

EL-MASRI: Christ, Aurel. If he's got the Rot, I think you know what to do with him.

SPURLEA: I'm still waiting for the blood work to come back. If it's not set in there, we can take the leg and save him.

EL-MASRI: And then do what with him? Look around, Aurel. It's not like we can support anyone *else* here, much less a recovering amputee who can't do any work.

GANAS: Maybe you should talk to him first before deciding to leave him out for the packs.

EL-MASRI: I'm not unsympathetic to his situation, Magda. But my job is to think about the whole colony.

GANAS: What the whole colony needs right now is for you to hear this guy's story. Then you'll have a better idea what to think.

EL-MASRI: What's this guy's name?

SPURLEA: Malik Damanis.

EL-MASRI: Malik. Fine.

[Door opens, stops.]

EL-MASRI (quietly): Lovely.
SPURLEA: There's a reason we call it the Rot.
EL-MASRI: Yeah.

[Door opens all the way.]

EL-MASRI: Malik … Hey, Malik.
MALIK DAMANIS: Yes. Sorry, I was dozing.
EL-MASRI: That's fine.
DAMANIS: Is Doctor Spurlea here? I think the pain is coming back.
SPURLEA: I'm here. I'll give you another shot, Malik, but it's going to have to wait for a few minutes. I need you to be all here for your conversation with our colony leader.
DAMANIS: That's you?
EL-MASRI: That's me. My name is Chenzira El-Masri.
DAMANIS: Malik Damanis. Uh, I guess you knew that.
EL-MASRI: I did. Malik, Aurel and Magda here tell me that you say you're from the *Erie Morningstar*.
DAMANIS: I am.
EL-MASRI: What do you do there?
DAMANIS: I'm an ordinary deckhand. I mostly work loading and unloading cargo.
EL-MASRI: You look pretty young. This your first ship?
DAMANIS: I'm nineteen standard, sir. No, I was on another ship before this, the *Shining Star*. I've been doing this since I turned twenty in Erie years, which is about sixteen years standard. This is my first tour on the *Morningstar,* though. Or was.

EL-MASRI: Was, you say.

DAMANIS: Yes, sir. She's gone, sir.

EL-MASRI: Gone as in left? She's gone off to her next destination.

DAMANIS: No. Gone as in gone, sir. She was taken. And I think everyone else who was on her might be dead now.

EL-MASRI: Malik, I think you need to explain this to me a little better. Was the ship all right when you skipped into our system?

DAMANIS: As far as I know. The ship stays on Erie time, and it was the middle of the night when we skipped. Captain Gahzini prefers to do it that way so that when we move cargo, we do it in the morning when we're fresh. Or that's what he tells us. Since the cargo we had for you was already packed when it came on board, it didn't really matter. The captain does what the captain does. So we arrived in the middle of the night for us.

EL-MASRI: Were you working then?

DAMANIS: No, sir, I was asleep in the crew quarters, along with most of the rest of the crew. We had a night's watch on at the time. The first thing I knew about anything going on was the captain sounding a general alert. It blasted on and everyone fell out of their bunks. We didn't think anything of it at the time.

EL-MASRI: You didn't think anything of a general alert? Doesn't that usually mean you're in an emergency?

DAMANIS: It does, but Captain Gahzini runs a lot of drills, sir. He says that just because we're a merchant ship doesn't mean we shouldn't have discipline. So every three or four skips he'll run a drill, and since the captain likes to skip in the middle of the night, that means we get woken up by a lot of general alerts.

EL-MASRI: All right.

DAMANIS: So we fall out of bunks, get dressed and then wait for the announcement about what the drill is this time. Is it a micrometeor puncture, or is it a systems failure of some sort, or what is it. Then finally Chief Officer Khosa comes on the public address system and

says, “We are being boarded.” And we all look at each other, because this is a new one; we haven’t ever practiced something like this. We have no idea what to do. Doctor, my leg is really hurting.

SPURLEA: I know, Malik. I’ll give you something as soon as you’re done talking.

DAMANIS: Can I get something in the meantime? Anything?

GANAS: I can give him some ibuprofen.

SPURLEA: We’re running low on that, Magda.

GANAS: I’ll take it out of my own stash.

SPURLEA: All right.

GANAS: Malik, I’m going to go get you that ibuprofen. It will be just a minute.

DAMANIS: Thank you, Doctor Ganas.

EL-MASRI: You said you never drilled for being boarded. But there have always been pirates.

DAMANIS: We’ve drilled for being pursued by pirates. For that, most of the crew locks down while defensive teams prep countermeasures and the cargo crew preps to jettison the cargo. We work in space. Pirates can’t swing over on ropes and take a ship. They run you down and threaten you to get you to hand over your cargo. Only then do they board the ship, take the cargo and go. That’s why the last resort is throwing out the cargo. If you don’t have it anymore, they have no reason to keep pursuing you.

EL-MASRI: So these weren’t pirates.

DAMANIS: We didn’t know what they were. At first we didn’t know that there *was* anyone. We still thought it was a drill. Chief Khosa tells us we’re being boarded and we have about two or three seconds to wonder what that means, and then he comes back on the PA and says, “This is not a drill.” That’s when we knew something was really up. But we didn’t know what to think. We weren’t drilled on this. We stood around looking at each other. Then Bosun Zarrani came into the quarters, told us we were being boarded and that we

were to stay in quarters until they heard from him or the captain sounded an "all clear." Then he picked seven of us to follow him. I was one of the ones he picked.

EL-MASRI: Why did he pick you?

DAMANIS: Me or all of us?

EL-MASRI: Both.

DAMANIS: He picked all of us to be a security detail. He picked me, I think, because I was where he could see me. I didn't know he wanted me to be part of a security detail until he took us into his office, opened up a footlocker and started handing out shock sticks.

SPURLEA: Shock sticks? Why didn't you have firearms?

DAMANIS: It's a spaceship. Guns with bullets aren't a good idea on any ship that works in vacuum. And the only reason to have weapons on the ship at all is to deal with someone who's gotten into a fight or is drunk and out of control. And for that, a shock stick is what you want. You zap someone, they go down, you shove them in the brig until they sober up and calm down. So we have shock sticks. Zarrani handed them out to us. There were six of them and eight of us, so I and Tariq Murwani didn't have any. Bosun Zarrani said that we got to be scouts and told us to turn our PDAs to a general channel so that everyone would know where the enemy was. That didn't make much sense to me. I figured that we knew where they would come in.

EL-MASRI: Through the airlocks.

DAMANIS: Yes, sir. They'd open them up from the outside and then get through that way. I think Zarrani and Captain Gahzini were thinking the same thing because Zarrani took two of the crew with the shock sticks with him to the port maintenance airlock while the other three went to the starboard maintenance airlocks. But we were wrong.

EL-MASRI: How did they get in?

DAMANIS: They cut through the hull forward and aft and dropped in maybe a dozen soldiers in each spot. I saw the aft breach and the soldiers dropping in and yelled into my PDA about it and then ran, because the soldiers were carrying assault rifles.

SPURLEA: I thought you didn't want projectile weapons on a spaceship.

DAMANIS: We don't, sir. The soldiers did. Their job was to take over the ship. And maybe they thought that since they were cutting a couple of holes through the hull anyway, what's a few bullet holes here and there, right?

GANAS: Here we go. Three tablets.

DAMANIS: Thank you.

GANAS: Let me get you some water.

DAMANIS: It's too late. I already swallowed them. How long will it take for it to start working?

GANAS: Those were extra-strength, so not long at all.

DAMANIS: That's good. My leg hurts a lot. I think it's getting worse.

SPURLEA: Let me look.

DAMANIS: *Ahhhhh—*

SPURLEA: Sorry about that.

DAMANIS: It's okay, Doctor. But it's like I told you. It hurts a lot.

SPURLEA: I'll see what I can do about cleaning it out again after we're done talking here.

DAMANIS: I'll definitely need some real painkillers for that. The last time you did it I thought I was going to hit the roof.

SPURLEA: I'll be as careful as I can.

DAMANIS: I know you're doing your best, Doctor Spurlea.

EL-MASRI: You say these were soldiers. Were they Colonial Defense Forces?

DAMANIS: I don't think so. They weren't wearing CDF uniforms. These were bulkier and black, and there were helmets covering their heads.

We couldn't see their faces or much of anything else. I suppose that makes sense, since they were coming in from space.

GANAS: If they were cutting through the hull, wouldn't bulkheads close off to contain the breach?

DAMANIS: I think they're supposed to, but the automatic systems are sensitive to pressure loss. These guys were coming through without any air going out behind them. I think they must have made a temporary airlock on the outside hull before they cut through.

EL-MASRI: Your captain still could have thrown up the bulkheads to keep them contained.

DAMANIS: The forward breach was right above the bridge deck. The very first thing they did, as far as I can tell, was to take the bridge and Captain Gahzini. Once they had the bridge, they had control of the ship. I was told by one of the bridge crew that when they came through, they ordered the captain to give them his command codes. He refused and they shot Chief Khosa in the gut. He was lying screaming on the deck and they told the captain they would gut shoot every person on the bridge unless he gave over the codes. Once the captain did that, they shot Khosa through the head to put him out of his misery, and then they had the ship.

EL-MASRI: What happened then?

DAMANIS: The soldiers went through the ship and collected the crew at gunpoint and took them to the cargo bay. I and the others on the security detail were trying to avoid the soldiers as long as we could, but eventually they found us all. I got caught near the mess hall. I stepped out into a corridor and there was a soldier on either side of me, rifles pointed at my chest and head. I tried going back where I was, but when I turned there was another soldier behind me, rifle up. I put up my hands and that was it. I was taken to the cargo bay like everyone else.

EL-MASRI: And through all of this none of the soldiers told you what they wanted.

DAMANIS: No, sir. When I was taken to the cargo deck, I saw all the other crew members on the deck, kneeling, hands behind their head. The only one standing was Bosun Zarrani, who was quoting Colonial Union merchant maritime law to one of the soldiers. The soldier seemed to ignore him for a little while, then drew a sidearm. He shot the bosun in the face, and then Zarrani was dead. And that was it for anyone asking questions.

SPURLEA: So the entire crew was there.

DAMANIS: Everyone but the captain and a helmsman named Qalat. And Khosa, but he was dead already.

EL-MASRI: So you were all in the cargo bay. How did *you* get from there to here, Malik?

DAMANIS: The *Erie Morningstar* had four autopilot container carriers. Two of them were full of the supplies for your colony. The other two were empty. The soldiers opened up those two and ordered us in, half into one, half into the other.

EL-MASRI: And you just went in?

DAMANIS: A couple of us resisted. They shot them in the head. They didn't waste any time talking to us or bargaining with us. As far as I can tell, except for the ones on the bridge getting the command codes from the captain, they didn't talk at all. There was no point in it, and they didn't have to talk to get us to do what they wanted.

EL-MASRI: After you were all in, what happened next?

DAMANIS: They sealed us into the cargo containers. Everything went pitch-black and people started screaming, and then a couple of us turned our PDAs on so their screens would give light. That seemed to calm people a bit. After that we could hear the sounds of people moving and talking—the soldiers would apparently talk to each other, not to us—but I couldn't hear anything clear enough to make out what they were saying or doing. And then there was another sound. It was the sound of the cargo bay's purge cycle. That's when

people started screaming again. It meant the cargo bay door was being opened and we were being thrown out.

GANAS: They were tossing the crew over the side.

DAMANIS: Yes, ma'am. Although one of the crew members in my container suggested something else. Once the container started moving and it was clear it was thrown off the ship, someone in the container started screaming, "We're walking the plank! We're walking the plank! We're walking the plank!" He kept doing this for a minute or two before I heard a thump and he shut up. I think someone punched him to make him quiet.

EL-MASRI: The cargo containers aren't designed for live transport.

DAMANIS: No, sir. They are airtight and they're insulated, so the cargo inside won't freeze in space or heat up excessively on reentry. But there's also no artificial gravity or anywhere to secure yourself. The closest thing to that are the pallet restraints at the bottom of the container. We use them to strap down the cargo pallets, but they don't do much good if you're not a pallet. I still grabbed one and tied it to my arm, as close as I could to the restraint anchor so at least *I* wouldn't go floating off. I thought it might help when we hit the atmosphere.

EL-MASRI: Did it?

DAMANIS: A little. We hit the atmosphere and everything began to shake and move. I held on to my pallet strap, but even then I was being whipped back and forth as the strap rotated around its anchor. I'd be slammed to the floor of the container, whip around in an arc and be slammed down again on the other side. I curled into a ball as much as I could and put my arms around my head to protect it, but it wasn't enough; I lost consciousness a couple of times in there. If I hadn't wrapped the strap around my arm, I would have been flung up into the container with the others.

GANAS: What happened to the others?

DAMANIS: People began to be slammed into walls and the floor and into each other, harder and faster as we dropped. A couple of times people hit me, but I was down near the floor, so most of the time they were hitting each other or the walls. They were screaming as they were flying about, and every once in a while you would hear a snap and then someone's screaming would either get louder or it would stop. After one really hard bump, a woman hit the floor next to me headfirst and I could hear her neck go. *She* stopped screaming. There were at least fifty of us in the container. I'd guess about ten or fifteen people died during reentry, and maybe that many others broke their arms or legs.

SPURLEA: It was a good thing you held on to that strap.

DAMANIS: [laughs] Look at my leg now, Doc. Tell me again how lucky I am.

GANAS: Is the ibuprofen helping now?

DAMANIS: A little. May I have some water now, please?

GANAS: Yes, of course.

EL-MASRI: Once you made it through the first part of the atmosphere, did things settle?

DAMANIS: Some. The autopilot kicked in and stabilized us, but then the parachutes deployed and everyone who was still floating was jammed to the floor of the container. That was more broken bones, but then at least everyone was on the floor of the container, because gravity had finally taken hold. Then there was a crashing sound, and everyone was thrown around. We were going through the trees, or whatever you have here for trees. Then there was a final crash, the container fell on its side, the doors flew open, and we were finally on the ground.

GANAS: Your water.

DAMANIS: Thank you.

SPURLEA: What was your physical condition at that point, Malik?

DAMANIS: I was hurt pretty badly. I'm pretty sure I had a concussion. But I could walk and I didn't have any broken bones. I unwrapped myself from the pallet strap and I headed for the door, and as I got outside some of the crew who had gotten out before me were standing in a small clearing, looking up and pointing, so I looked up where they were looking.

EL-MASRI: What were they pointing at?

DAMANIS: It was the other cargo container. It was tumbling and falling. The autopilot must have gotten damaged or something, because it wasn't stabilizing itself and its parachutes didn't deploy. We watched it tumble for twenty, thirty seconds, and then the trees got in the way and we couldn't see it anymore. But then a few seconds later we heard the sound of trees breaking and a huge crash. The container had hit the ground at close to full speed. If anyone had still been alive in that container before it hit, they didn't survive after. At least I don't see how they could.

EL-MASRI: Did you see any other containers falling?

DAMANIS: I stopped looking after that.

EL-MASRI: Malik, will you excuse me for a moment?

DAMANIS: Yes, sir. Does this mean we're done talking now? Can I get that shot now?

EL-MASRI: Hold on a minute, Malik. I'll be back to ask you some more questions.

DAMANIS: My leg is really hurting, sir.

EL-MASRI: It won't be long. Aurel, Magda?

[Door opens, closes.]

EL-MASRI: Why did you bring that recorder out here?

GANAS: Malik isn't going to say anything unless you're there.

EL-MASRI: Is it turned off right now?

GANAS: Yes.

EL-MASRI: Where did Malik come from? What direction, I mean?

SPURLEA: The couple who found him said they saw him come out of the forest to the east of the colony.

EL-MASRI: Do we have any people looking for the containers in that direction?

SPURLEA: Magda?

GANAS: We sent out five teams, and they all headed in different directions, so at least one of them is headed in an easterly direction.

EL-MASRI: Recall the other teams and have them go east as well. There's a chance our supplies are in that direction.

SPURLEA: You think pirates are going to eject cargo, Chen?

EL-MASRI: I think whoever took over the *Erie Morningstar* was interested in the ship, not the cargo. That's why they kept the captain and the helmsman and made everyone else walk the plank. It's entirely possible they tossed out the cargo with the crew. If they did, then we need to find it. We need those supplies.

GANAS: What about the survivors?

EL-MASRI: What survivors?

GANAS: Malik said that at least some of the crew in his container survived the landing. Do you want our people to go looking for them, too?

EL-MASRI: I think our first priority is looking for those supplies, Magda.

GANAS: That's pretty harsh, Chen. These people literally fall out of the sky and crash-land here, and you're not in the least concerned about them.

EL-MASRI: Look. I'm not going to apologize for the fact that when push comes to shove, I'm going to put the people of this colony before everyone else. This is why you all hired me as your colony leader, remember? You wanted someone with frontier experience, who was familiar with the tough decisions you have to make on the bleeding edge of human civilization. This is one of those decisions, Magda. Do we prioritize finding supplies for our people, who are healthy

but won't be *very soon* if we don't get the soil treatments and seed stock and emergency rations that were in the cargo shipment the *Erie Morningstar* had in her, or do we prioritize a bunch of people we don't know, the majority of whom it would seem are injured or dying, who would be nothing but a drain on our almost nonexistent resources? I'm the colony leader. I have to make a choice, and I choose *us*. Now, maybe you find that inhumane, but at the moment, ask me if I give a shit. This soil here kills everything we plant in it. Almost everything that grows or lives here we can't eat or is trying to kill us or both. We're down to the last three weeks of stores, and that's if we stretch. I have two hundred fifty people relying on me to save their lives. That's my job. I'm doing it by telling our people to look for those cargo containers first. End of story.

SPURLEA: At the very least, you should ask him to try to describe where he landed so that we can narrow down where we're searching. Wherever it was, he was able to walk to here from there in only a slightly better condition than he's in right now. That means it's not too far away. The more we know, the better we can find the cargo containers, if they exist.

EL-MASRI: You ask him.

SPURLEA: If I ask him, all he's going to do is keep asking for painkillers. That was the deal: He talks to you, and when he's done I'll give him something. So you need to do it.

EL-MASRI: How long until you know about his blood work? Whether he's got the Rot all through his system.

SPURLEA: I checked on my PDA while you were talking to him. The cultures are still growing. I'll know for sure in the next thirty minutes or so.

EL-MASRI: Fine. Magda, please let the search teams know to focus east, and that we'll hopefully give them more detailed information on where to look soon. Tell Drew Talford to send it wideband. It'll be faster than you trying to raise every party one at a time.

GANAS: What do we do if one of the search teams happens to find the *Erie Morningstar* survivors?

EL-MASRI: Note where they are, but steer clear of them for now. *If* we find the cargo containers with our supplies, we can go back and deal with them. But for now, let them be. We have other priorities.

GANAS: Here, Aurel. Make sure to record everything Malik says.

SPURLEA: Will do.

EL-MASRI: All right, let's get back in there.

[Door opens, closes.]

DAMANIS: I thought you had forgotten about me.

EL-MASRI: We wouldn't do that, Malik.

DAMANIS: That's good to hear. I'm sorry to take up so much of your time. You must be busy as colony leader.

EL-MASRI: Well, talking to you has been helpful, and you can be a little more helpful to me still, Malik.

DAMANIS: How can I do that?

EL-MASRI: I need you to tell me everything you can about where you landed and how you got here from there. That will help us find where you landed, and might help us find the rest of your crew.

DAMANIS: I'll tell you, but I don't think you'll find the rest of my crew. I think they're all dead.

EL-MASRI: You said that at least a few of your crewmates were alive when you landed. You've survived so far. So it stands to reason some of them might have as well.

DAMANIS: Unh.

EL-MASRI: Why are you shaking your head?

SPURLEA: Malik, did something else happen to your crew before you came here?

DAMANIS: Yes.

EL-MASRI: Tell us about it. It could be useful to us.

DAMANIS: After we landed, those of us who were mostly uninjured started helping those who were worse off. There were about ten of us at that point. We went back into the container so we could see who was living and who was dead. The dead we moved to one side of the container. The living we moved out of the container so we could see how badly they were injured. About half had broken bones but were still conscious or still able to move around. The rest were either unconscious or not able to move because they were too injured or in too much pain. We went back into the container and took the clothes off the dead to make slings and braces, and to make bandages where people were bleeding or had open breaks.

SPURLEA: So, ten relatively uninjured, about ten or fifteen somewhat injured and the same number severely injured. The rest dead.

DAMANIS: Yes. May I have some more water?

SPURLEA: Of course.

DAMANIS: When we were done with that, those of us who were still uninjured got together to discuss what to do next. Some of us wanted to find your colony. We knew it was down here because that's why we were over your planet in the first place, and we knew you couldn't be too far away. But none of our PDAs survived the fall and we couldn't signal you, or use them to keep track of whoever wandered off. Most of us wanted to build a better camp and get ourselves squared away, find some water and some food before we did anything else. I said we should move the dead out of the container and the living back in, so they would at least have shelter. One guy, Nadeem Davi, started talking about how we should consider the possibility of using the dead for food. We argued about that so long that we didn't notice what had happened to the forest.

EL-MASRI: What had happened?

DAMANIS: It had gone dead silent. Like it does when there's a predator around, right? Everything that could get eaten just shuts up and hides. We finally noticed it when we all stopped talking. It was dead silent except for our injured. And then—

SPURLEA: And then a pack of animals was on you.

DAMANIS: You *know* about these things?

EL-MASRI: We just call it "the pack." We don't call them anything else because we've never caught one by itself. You don't see them, or you see dozens of them. There's nothing in between.

DAMANIS: I didn't know that. I saw them coming out of the woods and they reminded me of the stories my grandmother told me of hyenas in Africa. There were just so many of them. One or two for every one of us.

EL-MASRI: We lost fourteen people to the pack early on before we learned not to wander too far into the woods alone. We go out in groups of four or five and always go armed. They seem to have gotten good at recognizing rifles. We don't see them as much as we used to.

DAMANIS: They made up for it with us. They went for the injured ones first, went right for their necks and open wounds. There was nothing we could do for them. Some of the less injured tried to run or crawl, but the pack went for their injuries, too. Like they knew that was going to cause us the most pain and drag us down so they could have us. Then at least a couple dozen got into a smaller pack and headed toward those of us who were still uninjured. Some of us tried to run, and didn't notice that there was another small pack flanking us. Nadeem was one of those; he went down fast and six of them were on him before any of us could do anything. Then the rest of them came right at us.

SPURLEA: How did you manage to escape?

DAMANIS: I didn't at first. One of the pack things bit into my calf and took a chunk of it. I managed to kick it off and then ran as fast as I

could in the other direction. By that time the rest of the crew was down and I guess the pack decided there was more than enough where they were. They didn't need to follow me. I just kept running until my leg gave out on me.

EL-MASRI: Do you remember which direction you mostly ran? North? South?

DAMANIS: I don't know. Mostly south? I remember the sun being to my right when I could see it, and I think it was morning here when we landed. So, south?

EL-MASRI: What happened then?

DAMANIS: I rested, but not too long, because my leg was already beginning to hurt, and I didn't want it to stiffen up on me. I kept heading south, and after a while, maybe ten minutes, I came to a stream. I remembered reading somewhere once that if you ever get lost in the woods that you should find a stream and then walk downstream, because sooner or later you'd find civilization that way. So after I drank some water and washed out my wound, I just started walking downstream. I walked and then I would rest for a couple of minutes and then I would start walking again. Eventually I came out of the woods and saw your colony. I saw a couple of people in a field.

SPURLEA: That would be the Yangs. They found him out in what was supposed to be their sorghum field.

EL-MASRI: Go on, Malik.

DAMANIS: I tried yelling to them and waving my hands, but I didn't know if they could hear me or not. Then I passed out, and when I woke up I was here, and Doctor Spurlea was trying to fix my leg. That woke me up.

EL-MASRI: I don't doubt that.

DAMANIS: And that's everything, sir. That's everything I know.

EL-MASRI: All right. Thank you, Malik.

DAMANIS: You're welcome, sir. Can I have my painkillers now? I'm really going to start crying soon.

SPURLEA: Absolutely, Malik. Give me one minute to talk to Chen here, and I'll come right back and hook you up.

[Door opens, closes.]

EL-MASRI: Well, at least now we know how he got the Rot. That pack bite would do it.

SPURLEA: And if it didn't, washing the wound in the stream water did.

EL-MASRI: You can't blame him for not knowing that the stream is packed with the Rot's bacteria.

SPURLEA: Believe me, I don't. His blood work just pinged, by the way.

EL-MASRI: Bad news?

SPURLEA: Don't make it sound like you *care,* Chen.

EL-MASRI: Just tell me.

SPURLEA: He's got it in his blood. He's got about twenty-four hours before the septicemia blows him up from the inside.

EL-MASRI: We don't have enough painkillers for you to let him ride out that whole time, Aurel. That's how we got into this situation with the painkillers in the first place.

SPURLEA: I know.

EL-MASRI: You're going to take care of this, then.

SPURLEA: When I go back in I'll give him enough to get him to sleep. I'll take care of it from there.

EL-MASRI: I'm sorry I have to be like this to you about it.

SPURLEA: I understand, Chen. I do. I'm just certain that when I die and meet Hippocrates, he's going to be sorely disappointed in me.

EL-MASRI: He's going to die anyway, and painfully. You wouldn't be doing him any favors.

SPURLEA: I'm going to change the subject by saying, Look, here comes Magda.

GANAS: The easterly team found the containers with the crew from the *Erie Morningstar*.

EL-MASRI: What's the report?

GANAS: Everyone's dead. Death at impact at one site. Death by the pack, it looks like, at the other. They're less than a klick apart, with the death-by-impact site being the most northerly one. The team took pictures, so if you want to have nightmares tonight, you can look.

EL-MASRI: No other containers?

GANAS: If they're there, they haven't found them yet.

EL-MASRI: Have them keep looking. Give all the other search teams the coordinates and fan out from there.

GANAS: How is Malik?

SPURLEA: The Rot's in his blood.

GANAS: Jesus.

SPURLEA: Just another perfect day here in New Seattle.

EL-MASRI: Look at it this way. It's unlikely to get much worse.

GANAS: Don't jinx it.

EL-MASRI: Thank you, Aurel, Magda. I'll let you know when or if we find those supplies.

SPURLEA: Thank you, Chen.

GANAS: There goes a right bastard.

SPURLEA: We knew what he was when we hired him.

GANAS: I know, but it's painful to be reminded of it so frequently.

SPURLEA: Without him we might be dead already.

GANAS: Which is also painful to be reminded of so frequently.

SPURLEA: Come on. We have to give Malik his painkillers.

GANAS: Did Chen tell you to finish him off after you did?

SPURLEA: He did.

GANAS: Will you?

SPURLEA: I don't know.

GANAS: You're a good and decent man, Aurel. You really, truly are. How you ended up on a wildcat colony is beyond me.

SPURLEA: You're one to talk, Magda. Let's go in.

GANAS: All right.

SPURLEA: And turn that off. Whatever I do, I don't want a record of it anywhere but on my conscience.

[Transcript Ends]

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EPISODE THREE

We Only Need the Heads

Hart Schmidt went to Ambassador Abumwe's temporary office on Phoenix Station when she pinged him, but she wasn't there. Schmidt knew that the ambassador not being in her office wasn't a good enough excuse for him not to be in her presence when commanded, so he did a hasty PDA search on his boss. Three minutes later, he walked up to her in an observation lounge.

"Ambassador," he said.

"Mr. Schmidt," the ambassador said, not turning to him. Schmidt followed her gaze out the wall-sized window of the observation deck, to the heavily damaged ship hovering at a slight distance from the station itself.

"The *Clarke,*" Schmidt said.

"Very good, Schmidt," Abumwe said, in a tone that informed him that, as with so many of the things he said to her in his role as a functionary on her diplomatic team, he was not telling her anything she didn't already know.

Schmidt made an involuntary, nervous throat clearing in response. "I saw Neva Balla earlier today," he said, naming the *Clarke*'s executive officer. "She tells me that it's not looking good for the *Clarke*. The damage it took on our last mission is pretty extensive. Fixing it will be nearly as expensive as building a new ship. She thinks it's likely they'll simply scrap it."

"And do what with the crew?" Abumwe said.

"She didn't say," Schmidt said. "She said the crew is being kept together, at least for the moment. There's a chance the Colonial Union may just take a new ship and assign the *Clarke*'s crew to it. They might even name it the *Clarke,* if they're going to scrap this one." Schmidt motioned in the direction of the ship.

"Hmmmm," Abumwe said, and then lapsed back into silence, staring at the *Clarke*.

Schmidt spent a few more uncomfortable minutes before clearing his throat again. "You pinged me, Ambassador?" he said, reminding her he was there.

"You say the *Clarke* crew hasn't been reassigned," Abumwe said, as if their earlier conversation hadn't had an extended pause in it.

"Not yet," Schmidt said.

"And yet, *my* team has," Abumwe said, finally looking over at Schmidt. "Most of it, anyway. The Department of State assures me that the reassignments are only temporary—they need my people to fill in holes on other missions—but in the meantime I'm left with two people on my team. They left me Hillary Drolet, and they left me you. I know why they left me Hillary. She's my assistant. I don't know why they chose to take every *other* member of my team, assign them some presumably important task, and leave *you* doing nothing at all."

"I don't have any good answer to that, ma'am," was the only thing that Schmidt could say that wouldn't have immediately put his entire diplomatic career in jeopardy.

"Hmmmm," Abumwe said again, and turned back to the *Clarke*.

Schmidt assumed this was his cue to depart and began stepping back out of the observation deck, perchance to avail himself of a stiff drink at the nearest commissary, when Abumwe spoke again.

"Do you have your PDA with you?" she asked him.

"Yes, ma'am," Schmidt said.

"Check it now," Abumwe said. "We have new orders."

Schmidt drew out the PDA from his jacket pocket, swiped it on and read the new orders flashing in his mail queue. "We're being attached to

the Bula negotiations," he said, reading the orders.

"Apparently so," Abumwe said. "Deputy Ambassador Zala ruptured her appendix and has to withdraw. Normally protocol would have her assistant step up and continue negotiations, but Zala's plank of the negotiations hasn't formally started, and for protocol reasons it's important for the Colonial Union to have someone of sufficient rank head this portion of the process. So here we are."

"What part of the negotiations are we taking over?" Schmidt asked.

"There's a reason I'm having you *read* the orders, Schmidt," Abumwe said. Her tone had returned. She turned to face him again.

"Sorry, ma'am," Schmidt said, hastily, and gestured at his PDA. "I'm not there yet."

Abumwe grimaced but kept whatever comment about Schmidt that was running through her head to herself. "Trade and tourism access to Bula worlds," she said instead. "How many ships, how large the ships, how many humans on the ground on Bulati and its colony worlds at one time, and so on."

"We've done that before," Schmidt said. "That shouldn't be a problem."

"There's a wrinkle that's not in your orders," Abumwe said. Schmidt looked up from his PDA. "There's a Bula colony world named Wantji. It was one of the last ones the Bula claimed before the Conclave told the unaffiliated races they could no longer colonize. They haven't put any of their people on it yet because they don't know how the Conclave would react to that."

"What about it?" Schmidt asked.

"Three days ago, the CDF received a skip drone from Wantji with an emergency distress message in it," Abumwe said.

Why would the Bula on an officially uninhabited planet send the Colonial Defense Forces a distress message? Schmidt almost asked, but didn't. He realized it was exactly the sort of question that would make the ambassador think he was even more stupid than she already

believed he was. Instead he attempted to figure out the question on his own.

After a few seconds, it came to him. "A wildcat colony," he said.

"Yes," Abumwe said. "A wildcat colony that the Bula don't appear to know anything about at the moment."

"We're not telling them it's there?" Schmidt asked.

"Not yet," Abumwe said. "The CDF is sending a ship first."

"We're sending a *warship* into Bula territory to check on a human colony that's not supposed to be there?" Schmidt said, slightly incredulously. "Ambassador, this is a very bad idea—"

"Of course it's a bad idea!" Abumwe snapped. "Stop informing me of obvious things, Schmidt."

"Sorry," Schmidt said.

"Our job in the negotiations is twofold," Abumwe said. "We negotiate the trade and tourism rights. We also negotiate them *slowly enough* that the *Tubingen* is able to get to Wantji and pluck that wildcat colony—or what's left of it—from the planet."

"Without telling the Bula," Schmidt said. He kept the skepticism from his voice as politely as possible.

"The thinking is that if the Bula aren't aware of it now, there is no point in making them aware," Abumwe said. "And if they become aware, then the wildcatters will have been removed before they present a genuine diplomatic issue."

"As long as they overlook a CDF ship having done time over their planet," Schmidt said.

"The thinking is that the *Tubingen* will be long gone before the Bula know they're there," Abumwe said.

Schmidt refrained from saying, *It's still a bad idea,* and chose something else instead. "You said it's the *Tubingen* that's heading to this colony planet," he said.

"Yes," Abumwe said. "What about it?"

Schmidt accessed his PDA and searched through his message queue. "Harry Wilson was attached to the *Tubingen* a few days ago," he said,

and turned his PDA to the ambassador to show her the message Wilson had sent him. "Its CDF platoon lost their systems guy on Brindle. Harry was stepping in for their current mission. Which would be this one, wouldn't it."

"Yet another team member of mine farmed out," Abumwe said. "What is your point?"

"My point is that it could be useful for us to have someone on the ground on this," Schmidt said. "You know we're getting dealt a bad hand here, ma'am. At the very least Harry can tell us how bad of a hand it actually is."

"Asking your CDF friend for information on an active military mission is a fine way to get yourself shot, Schmidt," Abumwe said.

"I suppose it would be," Schmidt said.

Abumwe was silent at this for a moment. "I don't think you should risk being caught doing something like that," she said, eventually.

"I understand you entirely, ma'am," Schmidt said. He turned to go.

"Schmidt," Abumwe said.

"Yes, ma'am," Schmidt said.

"You understand that earlier I was implying that they left you with me because you were largely useless," Abumwe said.

"I got that, yes," Schmidt said, after a second.

"I'm sure you did," Abumwe said. "Now. Prove me wrong." She returned her gaze to the *Clarke*.

Oh boy, Harry, Schmidt thought as he walked away. *I hope you're having an easier time of things than I am right now.*

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The shuttle from the *Tubingen* hit the atmosphere of the planet like a rock punching into an earthen dam, throwing off heat and rattling the platoon of Colonial Defense Forces soldiers inside as if they were plastic balls in a child's popper.

"This is nice," Lieutenant Harry Wilson said, to no one in particular, then directed his attention to his fellow lieutenant Heather

Lee, the platoon commander. "It's funny how something like air can feel so bumpy."

Lee shrugged. "We have restraints," she said. "And this isn't a social call."

"I know," Wilson said. The shuttle rattled again. "But this has always been my least favorite part of a mission. Aside from, you know. The shooting and killing and being shot and possibly eaten by aliens."

Lee did not look impressed with Wilson. "Been a while since you've dropped, Lieutenant?"

Wilson nodded. "Did my combat time and then transferred into research and technical advising for the diplomatic corps. Don't have to do many drops for that. And the ones I do come down nice and easy."

"Consider this a refresher course," Lee said. The shuttle rattled again. Something creaked worryingly.

"Space," Wilson said, and sank back into his restraints. "It's *fantastic*."

"It *is* fantastic, sir," said the soldier next to Lee. Wilson automatically had his BrainPal query the man's identity; instantly, text floated over the soldier's head to let Wilson know he was speaking to Private Albert Jefferson. Wilson glanced over to Lee, the platoon leader, who caught the glance and gave another, most infinitesimal of shrugs, as if to say, *He's new*.

"I was attempting sarcasm, Private," Wilson said.

"I know that, sir," Jefferson said. "But I'm being serious. Space is fantastic. All of this. It is awesome."

"Well, except for the cold and vacuum and the unbearable silent death of it," Wilson said.

"Death?" Jefferson said, and smiled. "Begging the lieutenant's pardon, but death was back home on Earth. Do you know what I was doing three months ago, sir?"

"I'm guessing being old," Wilson said.

"I was hooked up to a dialysis machine, praying I would make it to my seventy-fifth birthday," Jefferson said. "I'd already gotten one

transplant, and they didn't want to give me another because they knew I was going to leave anyway. Cheaper to hook me up. I barely made it. But I got to seventy-five, signed up and a week later, boom. New body, new life, new career. Space is awesome."

The shuttle hit an air pocket of some sort, tumbling the transport before the pilot could right the ship again. "There's the minor problem that you might have to kill things," Wilson said, to Jefferson. "Or get killed. Or fall out of the sky. You're a soldier now. These are the occupational hazards."

"Fair trade," Jefferson said.

"Is it," Wilson said. "First mission?"

"Yes, sir," Jefferson said.

"I'll be interested to know if your answer to that is the same a year from now," Wilson said.

Jefferson grinned. "You strike me as a 'glass half-empty' kind of guy, sir," he said.

"I'm a 'the glass is half-empty and filled with poison' kind of guy, actually," Wilson said.

"Yes, sir," Jefferson said.

Lee nodded suddenly, not at Wilson or Jefferson, but at the message she was getting from her BrainPal. "Drop-off in two," she said. "Fire teams." The soldiers formed up into groups of four. "Wilson. You're with me." Wilson nodded.

"You know, I was one of the last people off, sir," Jefferson said to Wilson a minute later, as the shuttle zeroed in on its landing site.

"Off of what?" Wilson said. He was distracted; he was going over the mission specs on his BrainPal.

"Off of Earth," Jefferson said. "The day I went up the Nairobi beanstalk, that guy brought that alien fleet into Earth orbit. Scared the hell out of all of us. We thought we were under attack. Then the fleet started transmitting all sorts of things about the Colonial Union."

"You mean, like the fact it had been socially engineering the Earth for centuries to keep it a farm for colonists and soldiers," Wilson said.

Jefferson snorted quietly. "That's a little paranoid, don't you think, sir? I think this fellow—"

"John Perry," Wilson said.

"—has some explaining to do about how he managed to head up an alien fleet in the first place. Anyway, my transport ship was one of the last out of Earth dock. There were one or two more, but after that I'm told the Earth stopped sending us soldiers and colonists. They want to renegotiate their relationship to the Colonial Union, is how I've heard it."

"Doesn't seem unreasonable, all things considered," said Wilson.

The shuttle landed with a muted thump and settled into the earth.

"All I know, sir, is I'm glad this Perry guy waited until I was gone," Jefferson said. "Otherwise I'd still be old and missing my kidneys and probably near death. Whatever's out here is better than what I had there."

The shuttle door cracked open and the outside air rushed in, hot and sticky and rich with the scent of death and decomposition. From the platoon came a few audible groans and the sound of at least one person gagging. Then the platoon began its disembarkment by fire teams.

Wilson looked over at Jefferson, whose face had registered the full effect of the smell coming off the planet. "I hope you're right," Wilson said. "But from the smell of it, we're probably near death here, too."

They stepped out of the shuttle and onto a new world.

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The Bula sub-ambassador looked not unlike a lemur, as all Bula did, and carried the jeweled amulet that signified her station in the diplomatic corps. She had an unpronounceable name, which all things considered was not unusual, but insisted that Abumwe and her staff call her "Sub-Ambassador Ting." "It is close enough for government work," she said, through a translator device on her lanyard as she shook Abumwe's hand.

"Then welcome, Sub-Ambassador Ting," Abumwe said.

"Thank you, Ambassador Abumwe," Ting said, and motioned for her, Drolet and Schmidt to sit across from her and her two staff at the conference room table. "We are delighted that someone such as yourself was available for these negotiations on such short notice. It is a shame about Katerina Zala. Please send her my regards."

"I shall," Abumwe said. She sat.

"What is this 'appendix' she ruptured?" Ting asked, sitting herself.

"It's a vestigial organ attached to the larger digestive system," Abumwe said. "Sometimes it gets inflamed. A rupture can cause sepsis and death if not treated."

"It sounds horrible," Ting said.

"It was caught early enough that Deputy Ambassador Zala was in no real danger," Abumwe said. "She will be fine in a few days."

"That's good to hear," Ting said. "Interesting how such a small part can threaten the health of an entire system."

"I suppose it is," Abumwe said.

Ting sat there for a moment, companionably silent, and then with a start grabbed the PDA her assistant had laid before her. "Well, let us begin, shall we. We don't want our diplomatic system grinding to a halt because of *us*."

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The hand-tooled sign at the edge of the colony read, "New Seattle." As far as Wilson could see, it was the only thing in the colony that hadn't burned.

"Teams, report in," Lee said. There were no teams other than her own near her; her voice was being carried by BrainPal. Wilson opened up the general channel in his own head.

"Team one here," said Blaine Givens, the team leader. "I've got nothing but burned huts and dead bodies."

"Team two here," said Muhamad Ahmed. "I've got the same."

"Team three," said Janet Mulray. "More of the same. Whatever happened here isn't happening now." The three other teams reported the same.

"Anybody finding survivors?" Lee asked. Responses came in: None so far. "Keep looking," she said.

"I need to get to the colony HQ," Wilson said. "That's why I'm here."

Lee nodded and moved her team forward.

"I thought we weren't colonizing anymore," Jefferson said to Wilson as they moved into the colony. "The aliens told us they'd vaporize any planet we colonized."

"Not 'the aliens,'" Wilson said. "The Conclave. There's a difference."

"What's the difference?" Jefferson asked.

"There are about six hundred different alien races we deal with," Wilson said. "Maybe two-thirds of them are in the Conclave. The rest of them are like us, unaffiliated." He routed around a dead colonist who lay, charred, in the path.

"And what does that mean, sir?" Jefferson asked, routing around the same body but letting his eyes linger on it.

"It means they're like us," Wilson said. "If they colonize, the Conclave will blast the crap out of them, too."

"But this is a colony," Jefferson said, turning his eyes back to Wilson. "Our colony."

"It's a wildcat colony," Wilson said. "It's not sanctioned by the Colonial Union. And this is someone else's planet anyway."

"The Conclave's?" Jefferson asked.

Wilson shook his head. "No, the Bula. Another group of aliens entirely." He motioned at the burned-out huts and sheds around them. "When these guys headed here, they were on their own. No support from the CU. And no defense, either."

"So not our colony," Jefferson said.

"No," Wilson said.

"Will the aliens see it that way, sir?" Jefferson asked. "Either group, I mean."

"Since we'd be screwed either way if they didn't, let's hope so," Wilson said. He looked up and saw that he and Jefferson had gotten off the pace of Lee. "Come on, Jefferson." He jogged to catch up with the platoon leader.

Two minutes later, Wilson and Lee's squad were in front of a partially collapsed Quonset hut. "I think this is it," Lee said, to Wilson. "The HQ, I mean."

"How do you figure?" Wilson said.

"Largest building inside the colony proper," Lee said. "Have to have some place for town meetings."

"I can't argue with that logic," Wilson said, and looked at the hut, concerned about its stability. He looked over at Lee and her squad.

"After you, Lieutenant," Lee said. Wilson sighed and pried open the door to the hut.

Inside the hut were two bodies and a whole lot of mess.

"Looks like something's been at them," Lee said, tapping one with a foot. Wilson saw Jefferson, looking at the body, turn a sicklier shade of green than he already was.

"How long have they been dead, do you think?" Wilson asked.

Lee shrugged. "Between the time they sent the distress call and we got here? Couldn't be less than a week."

"Since when do wildcat colonies report back?" Wilson asked.

"I just go where they tell me, Lieutenant," Lee said. She motioned to Jefferson and pointed at one of the bodies. "Check that body for an ID chip. Colonists sometimes put them in so they can keep track of each other."

"You want me to go through the body?" Jefferson asked, clearly horrified.

"Ping it," Lee said, impatiently. "Use your BrainPal. If there's a chip, it'll respond."

Wilson turned away from Lee and Jefferson's truly compelling discussion and headed farther into the hut. The bodies had been in an open area that he suspected, true to Lee's hunch, was used for colony gatherings. Farther in were a set of what used to be cubicles and a small enclosed room.

The cubicles were a shattered mess; the room, from the outside, at least, looked intact. Wilson was hoping the colony's computing and communications hardware were in there.

The room door was locked. Wilson jiggled the door handle a couple of times to be sure, then looked at the other side of the door. He pulled out his multipurpose tool, formed it into a crowbar and pulled the pins out of the door hinges. He set the door aside and looked into the room.

Every piece of equipment had been hammered into oblivion.

"Crap," Wilson said to himself. He went into the room anyway to see if anything was salvageable.

"Find anything?" Lee asked a few minutes later, appearing by the door.

"If someone likes puzzles, they could have fun with this," Wilson said. He stood up and gestured to the remains of the equipment.

"So nothing you can use," Lee said.

"No," Wilson said. He bent down and grabbed a piece of debris and held it out for Lee to take. "That's supposed to be the memory core. It's been hammered out of usability. I'll take it back and try to get something out of it anyway, but I wouldn't be holding out hope."

"Maybe some of the colonists' computers and handhelds will have something," Lee said. "I'll have my people collect them."

"That would be nice," Wilson said. "Although if everything tied through this central server, it's possible everything got wiped before this got broken up."

"It wasn't just destroyed in the fighting," Lee said.

Wilson shook his head and motioned to the wreckage. "Locked room. No other damage to this part of the hut. And it looked to me like

the damage here was methodical. Whoever did it didn't want what was stored on it to get captured."

"But you said the door was locked," Lee said. "Whoever ran over this place didn't stop to check the computer."

"Yeah," Wilson said, and then looked over at Lee. "What about you? Get anything off the bodies?"

"Yeah, once Jefferson figured out what he was doing," Lee said. "Martina and Vasily Ivanovich. In the absence of any other evidence to the contrary, I've nominated them as the two who ran the computers here. I'm having the teams check the other bodies for ID chips, too."

"Anything else but their names?" Wilson asked.

"The usual biometric data," Lee said. "I pinged the *Tub* to see if there was anything in its databases, but there wasn't anything. I wasn't expecting there to be, unless they happened to be ex-CDF."

"Just two more idiots on a spectacularly ill-advised colonization attempt," Wilson said.

"With about a hundred and fifty other idiots," Lee said.

"And thus the Colonial Union is infinitesimally smarter," Wilson said. Lee snorted.

In the distance came the sound of someone retching. Lee craned back to look. "Oh, look, it's Jefferson," she said. "He's popped."

Wilson got up to look. "That took a little bit longer than I expected," he said.

"He's been driving us all a little crazy with the gung ho thing," Lee said.

"He's new," Wilson said.

"Hopefully it wears off," Lee said, "before the rest of us kill him."

Wilson smiled at this and then threaded back through the mess to Jefferson.

"Sorry, sir," he said. He was kneeling by the body of the late Vasily Ivanovich, a puddle of sick off to his side. His other two fire team members had found some other place to be.

"You're hanging out near two partially decomposed, partially eaten bodies," Wilson said. "Being sick is a perfectly rational response."

"If you say so," Jefferson said.

"I do say so," Wilson said. "My first mission, I almost wet myself. Throwing up is fine."

"Thank you, sir," Jefferson said.

Wilson patted Jefferson on the back and glanced over at Vasily Ivanovich. The man was a mess, bloated and with a significant amount of his abdomen chewed away by scavengers. From his vantage point, Wilson could see into the gnawed-on remains of Ivanovich's digestive system.

Inside of which something glinted.

Wilson frowned. "What is that?" he said.

"What is what, sir?" Jefferson asked.

Wilson ignored him and looked closer and then, after a minute, thrust his glove into what remained of Ivanovich's stomach.

Jefferson gagged but didn't have anything else to throw up, so instead he stared openly at the small, glittery thing in Wilson's gore-coated hand. Wilson delicately picked out the thing with his other hand and held it up in the light.

"What is that?" Jefferson asked.

"It's a data card," Wilson said.

"What was it doing in his stomach?" Jefferson asked.

"I have no idea," Wilson said, and then turned his head. "Lee!" he shouted.

"What?" Lee shouted back from the other side of the hut.

"Have your people look for a functioning PDA and bring it to me immediately," he said. "One that takes data cards."

Shortly thereafter, Wilson had jammed the data card into a handheld and connected his BrainPal to the computer.

"Why would he swallow a data card?" Lee asked, as she watched Wilson.

"He wanted to keep the data out of enemy hands," Wilson said. He was simultaneously going through the file hierarchy on the data card.

"That's why he destroyed the computer and communications equipment," Lee said.

"I'd have more answers for you if you let me actually concentrate on what I'm doing," Wilson said. Lee shut up, slightly annoyed. Wilson ignored this, closed his eyes and focused on his data.

Several minutes later, Wilson opened his eyes and looked at Ivanovich with something that approached wonder.

Lee noticed. "What?" she said. "What is it?"

Wilson looked up at Lee blankly, and then back to Ivanovich, and then at the body of Martina Ivanovich.

"Wilson," Lee said.

"I think we better take back these bodies," Wilson said.

"Why?" Lee asked, looking at the corpses.

"I'm not sure I can tell you," Wilson said. "I don't think you have the clearance."

Lee looked back at Wilson, annoyed.

"It's not about you," Wilson assured her. "I'm pretty confident I don't have the clearance either."

Lee, not precisely satisfied, looked back at the Ivanoviches. "So you want us to haul these up to the *Tub*."

"You don't have to bring all of them," Wilson said.

"Come again?" Lee said.

"You don't have to bring their entire bodies," Wilson said. "Their heads will do just fine."

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"You feel it, too, don't you," Abumwe said to Schmidt, during a break in negotiations. The two were in the conference room hallway, drinking the tea Schmidt had gotten them.

"Feel what, ma'am?" Schmidt said.

Abumwe sighed. "Schmidt, if you don't want me to keep believing that you are entirely useless to me, then you have to actually *be* useful to me," she said.

Schmidt nodded. "All right," he said. "There's something not right about Sub-Ambassador Ting."

"That's right," Abumwe said. "Now tell me what that something not right is."

"I don't know," Schmidt said. He saw Abumwe get a look on her face and held up his hand peremptorily. This surprised Abumwe into silence. "Sorry," Schmidt said, hastily. "I say I don't know because I'm not sure what the cause of it is. But I know what the result is. She's being too easy on us in the negotiations. We're getting too many of the things we want from her. We're getting something close to a rubber stamp."

"Yes," Abumwe said. "I'd like to know why."

"Maybe she's just a bad negotiator," Schmidt said.

"The Bula pulled out these parts of the negotiations specifically for more detailed attention," Abumwe said. "This suggests they are not trivial to the Bula. The Bula also aren't known for being pushovers in negotiations. I don't think they'd put a poor negotiator in charge of this part of the process."

"Do we know anything about Ting?" Schmidt asked.

"Nothing Hillary could find," Abumwe said. "The Colonial Union files on diplomatic missions focus on the primary diplomats, not the secondary ones. I have her looking for more, but I don't expect to find too much. In the meantime, what are your suggestions?"

Schmidt took a small moment to internally register surprise that Abumwe was indeed asking for options from him, and then said, "Keep doing what we're doing. We *are* getting what we want from her. The thing we have to worry about at this point is getting them too soon, and getting done before the *Tubingen* finishes her mission."

"I can come up with some reason to suspend negotiations until tomorrow," Abumwe said. "I can ask for some more time to research

some particular point. That won't be difficult to do."

"All right," Schmidt said.

"On the subject of the *Tubingen*, any news from your friend?" Abumwe asked.

"I sent him an encrypted note on the next skip drone to the ship," Schmidt said.

"You shouldn't trust our encryption," Abumwe said.

"I don't," Schmidt assured her. "But I think it would have been suspicious for me to send him an unencrypted note, considering the mission. The note itself is innocuous blather, which contains a line that says, 'It was like that time on Phoenix Station.'"

"What does that mean?" Abumwe said.

"Basically it means 'Tell me if something interesting is going on,'" Schmidt said. "He'll understand it."

"Do you want to explain to me how it is the two of you have your own little secret code?" Abumwe said. "Did you make it up together when you were six?"

"Uh," Schmidt said, uncomfortable. "It just sort of came about."

"Really," Abumwe said.

"Harry would see you pissed at me during some negotiation or another and came up with it as a way to let me know he was interested in knowing the details later," Schmidt said, quickly. He looked away as he said it.

"Are you actually that scared of me, Schmidt?" Abumwe said, after a second.

"I wouldn't say 'scared,'" Schmidt said. "I would say I have a healthy respect for your working methods."

"Yes, well," Abumwe said. "For the moment, at least, your terrified obsequiousness is not going to be useful to me. So stop it."

"I'll try," Schmidt said.

"And let me know if you hear from your friend," Abumwe said. "I don't know what Sub-Ambassador Ting is up to, either. It's making me

uncomfortable. But I have a worry that somehow that wildcat colony on Wantji is involved. If it is, I want to know how before anyone else."

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"You want me to do what?" asked Doctor Tomek. They had taken the entire bodies of the Ivanoviches after all, and both of them were now spread out on examination tables. Doctor Tomek was too much of a professional to register displeasure at the sight and smell of the decayed bodies, but she was not notably pleased with Lieutenant Wilson for bringing them into her medical bay unannounced.

"Scan their brains," Wilson said. "I'm looking for something."

"What are you looking for?" Tomek asked.

"I'll tell you if I find it," Wilson said.

"Sorry, I don't work that way," Tomek said. She glanced over to Lieutenant Lee, who had remained after her soldiers had hauled the Ivanoviches into the medical bay. "Who is this guy?" she asked, pointing at Wilson.

"He's temporarily replacing Mitchusson," Lee said. "We're borrowing him from a diplomatic mission. And there's something else about him."

"What?" Tomek asked.

Lee motioned with her head to Wilson, who took that as his cue.

"I've got top-level security clearance that allows me to order anyone on the ship to do what I want them to do," Wilson said, to Tomek. "It's left over from my last mission. They didn't get around to revoking it from me."

"I've already complained to Captain Augustyn about it," Lee said. "He agrees it's a crock of shit but also that there's nothing we can do about it right now. He'll send a complaint with the next skip drone. Until then, you've got to do what he tells you."

"It's still my medical bay," Tomek said.

"Which is why I'm asking *you* to do the scan," Wilson said, and nodded at the body scanner tucked into a cubbyhole in the back of the

medical bay. "I've serviced those, and have trained on them. I could do the scan myself. But you'd do it better. I'm not trying to shut you out, Doctor. But if what I'm looking for isn't actually there, then it's best for everyone if my paranoid delusions are kept to myself."

"And if it is there?" Tomek asked.

"Then things begin to get really complicated," Wilson said. "So let's hope we don't find it."

Tomek glanced back over to Lee, who shrugged. Wilson caught the substance of the shrug. *Humor this idiot,* it said. *We'll be rid of him soon enough.* Well, that worked for him.

Tomek walked over to the cubbyhole and retrieved the scanner and the reflection plate, then came back to the examining table that held Vasily Ivanovich. She donned gloves, gently lifted Ivanovich's head and set the plate behind it.

"Where's the visual going?" Wilson asked. Tomek motioned with her head to the display above the examination table; Wilson turned it on. "Ready when you are," he said. Tomek positioned the scanner, activated it and after a couple of seconds looked up at the display.

"What the hell?" she asked, after a moment.

"Lovely," Wilson said, looking at the display. "And by 'lovely,' I mean 'Oh, crap.'"

"What is it?" Lee asked, coming over to get a better look at the thing Wilson and Tomek were looking at.

"I'll give you a hint," Wilson said. "We've all got one in our head."

"That's a *BrainPal*?" Lee asked, pointing at the screen.

"Got it in one," Wilson said, and leaned in toward the display. "Looks like a little different design than the version I worked on when I was in CDF Research and Development. But it can't be anything else."

"This guy is a civilian," Tomek said. "What the hell is he doing with a BrainPal?"

"Two possible explanations," Wilson said. "One, it's not a BrainPal, and we're looking at a really coincidentally-arranged tumor. Two, our

friend Vasily Ivanovich isn't really a civilian. One of these is more likely than the other."

Tomek glanced over at Martina Ivanovich. "What about her?" she asked.

"I suspect they're a matching set," Wilson said. "Shall we find out?"

They were indeed a matching set.

"You know what this means," Tomek said, after she shut off the scanner.

Wilson nodded. "I told you this would get complicated."

Lee looked over at the two of them. "I'm not following."

"We've got BrainPals in the heads of two apparent civilians," Wilson said. "Which means they're probably not civilians. Which suggests this wildcat colony might not be the freelance colonization effort that it's been advertised as being. And now we know why all the computers and records were destroyed by the colonists."

"Except for the data chip you found in this guy," Lee said, pointing to Vasily Ivanovich.

"I don't think he swallowed it to *save* it," Wilson said. "I think he swallowed it because they were being overrun and he didn't have time to destroy it any other way."

"What was on the chip?" Tomek said.

"A bunch of daily status reports," Wilson said. Lee frowned at this, clearly not seeing how that would matter. "It's not what data were on the chip that was important," Wilson continued. "It was the fact that data were saved in a memory structure that's proprietary to BrainPals. The fact it exists implies someone was using a BrainPal. The fact the BrainPal exists implies this is more than just a wildcat colony."

"We need to tell Captain Augustyn about this," Lee said.

"He's the captain," Tomek said. "He probably already knows."

"If he already knew, he probably wouldn't have let me order you to examine these two," Wilson said. "No matter what my security level. No, I think this is going to be as much of a surprise to him as it is to us."

"So we tell him," Lee said. "We tell him, right?"

"Yes," Wilson said. "He'll send a skip drone detailing what we've found. And I expect that immediately thereafter we'll get new orders, telling us that it's no longer just an extraction job."

"What will it be now?" Lee asked.

"A cover-up," Tomek said, and Wilson nodded. "Destroy any evidence this was anything *but* a wildcat colony."

"We're supposed to be destroying all the evidence anyway," Lee said.

"Not just down *there,*" Wilson said. He pointed to the Ivanoviches. "I mean turning these two—and their BrainPals—into a fine powder. Not to mention obliterating any information on what we just found out, and that data card we found. And if these two really were still active in the CDF, I suspect they'll be posthumously demoted for not blowing their own heads off with a shotgun."

Lee went to speak with Captain Augustyn; Tomek stored the bodies. Wilson wandered toward the officers mess to get a cup of coffee. As he did so, he pinged his BrainPal's message queue and found there was a message there from Hart Schmidt. Wilson smiled and prepared for a delightful dose of Schmidt's special brand of wan neuroticism. He stopped smiling when Hart noted he'd been assigned to be Ambassador Abumwe's right-hand man for the Bula negotiations and that Sub-Ambassador Ting's personality was like that one time on Phoenix Station he and Wilson had met up with that other Bula.

"Shit," Wilson said. There's no way that Hart put *that* phrasing in *that* sentence coincidentally.

Wilson thought about it for several minutes before muttering, "Fuck it," composing a note and encrypting it. Then with his BrainPal he took an image of his coffee, created a steganographic picture with it and the encoded note, addressed it to Hart and sent it off to the data queue for transmission on the next skip drone, which given the bombshell Lee was dropping into Captain Augustyn's lap at the moment would probably go out almost instantly.

Wilson wasn't under the impression that his sleight-of-hand encoding of the message into the image of the coffee would stay unnoticed forever. What he was hoping for was that it would stay encrypted long enough that Hart could do whatever he needed with the information before it got found out.

"Hopefully that won't take too long," Wilson said, to his coffee. His coffee was mute on the subject. Wilson slurped some of it and then called up the data he'd transferred from Vasily Ivanovich's data card into his BrainPal. They were indeed entirely pedestrian reports on colony life, but Wilson had already found something important in there. He didn't want to miss anything else. He suspected he didn't have all that much time left to go through the data before he was ordered to delete all of it.

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Schmidt didn't know what strings Ambassador Abumwe had to pull to get her way, but she pulled them. Across the table from her and Schmidt were Anissa Rodabaugh, chief of the mission for the Bula negotiations, Colonel Liz Egan, the liaison between the Colonial Defense Forces and the Department of State, and Colonel Abel Rigney, whose exact position was not known to Hart but whose presence here was nevertheless slightly unsettling. The three of them eyed Abumwe coolly; she returned the favor. No one was paying attention to Schmidt, and he was fine with that.

"We're here," Egan said, to Abumwe. "You have five minutes before you and Ambassador Rodabaugh have to get back to it. So tell us why you so urgently needed to see us all."

"You haven't been entirely forthcoming with me about this wildcat colony on Wantji," Abumwe said. Schmidt noted the clipped tone that Abumwe's voice took on when she was especially irritated; he wondered if it was noticeable to anyone else at the table.

"In what way?" Egan asked.

"In that it's not a wildcat colony at all, it's an under-the-radar Colonial Defense Forces outpost," Abumwe said.

This received about ten seconds of silence, with Rodabaugh, Egan and Rigney studiously not looking at one another. "I'm not entirely sure why you think that is," Egan said.

"Are we going to waste the next five minutes with this sort of bullshit, Colonel?" Abumwe said. "Or are we actually going to talk about how this is going to affect our negotiations?"

"It's not going to affect the negotiations at all—," Rodabaugh said.

"Really," Abumwe said, cutting her off. Schmidt noted the chagrin on Rodabaugh's face at this, but she and Abumwe were technically of the same diplomatic rank, so there was little she could do about it. "Because, Anissa, I have a Bula sub-ambassador I've been talking to for the last day who I am almost entirely certain knows more about this so-called colony than I do. I think as a result I'm being led down a very short pier. I think when I get pushed off, the entire negotiation is going to go down with me. If I fail at a negotiation because of my own failures, I accept that. If I fail because I'm being screwed by my own side, that I will not accept."

Colonel Rigney, who had been silent to this point, turned to Schmidt. "Your friend Harry Wilson's on the *Tubingen,*" he said, to Schmidt. "I just checked through my BrainPal. He's the one who's feeding you information."

Schmidt opened his mouth, but Abumwe reached out to touch Schmidt on the shoulder. This as much as anything else shocked Schmidt into silence; he couldn't remember another time Abumwe had physically touched him before. "If Hart or Harry Wilson have done anything, it's been on my orders," she said.

"You ordered him and Wilson to essentially spy on a Colonial Defense Forces mission," Rigney said.

"I reminded them of their obligation to help me achieve our goals as diplomats," Abumwe said.

"By spying on the Colonial Defense Forces mission," Rigney repeated.

"I appreciate the attempt to run out the clock by distracting me into a side discussion, Colonel Rigney, but let's not," Abumwe said. "I repeat: We have a military mission on a Bula world. I'm almost certain the Bula we are negotiating with are aware of it."

"What's your proof of that?" Rodabaugh asked.

"Nothing hard," Abumwe said. "But I know when people aren't negotiating in good faith."

"That's it?" Rodabaugh said. "You have a *feeling*? You're dealing with an alien species, for Christ's sake. Their whole psychology is entirely different."

"And that doesn't matter at all, because in fact we have an illegal military outpost on this alien species' planet," Abumwe said. "If I am wrong, then we lose nothing. If I am right, however, then we risk the failure of the entire process."

"What do you want from us, Ambassador?" Egan asked Abumwe.

"I want to know what's really going on," Abumwe said. "It's bad enough that I went into negotiations having to deal with the possibility that the Bula would discover we snuck a military ship into their territory to remove an attacked wildcat colony, but at least I could spin that if I had to. There is no way to spin a CDF ship coming to the aid of a covert military installation."

"It wasn't a covert military operation," Rigney said, leaning forward.

This got Egan's attention. "Are you really going to do this, Abel?" she asked, turning to Rigney.

"She already knows more than she should, Liz," Rigney said. "I don't think a little context is going to matter at this point." He turned back to Abumwe. "It really is a wildcat colony," he said.

"A wildcat colony with CDF soldiers in it," Abumwe said. The skepticism in her voice was impossible to miss.

"Yes," Rigney said. "Since the Conclave has restricted us and other unaffiliated species from colonizing, we've been dropping a few CDF members into wildcat colonies. The rest of the colonists don't know. We modify their bodies to look and act like natural human bodies, but keep their BrainPals in. They record data and send it along occasionally. We recruit CDF members with a background in technical work so they usually end up being in control of their colonies' communications systems."

"To what end?" Abumwe asked.

"We want to see how the Conclave responds to wildcat colonies," Rigney said. "Whether it sees them as a threat, whether they respond to them the same way as an official colony, and whether ultimately wildcat colonies—or colonies that give the appearance of being wildcat colonies—are a way we can keep expanding our presence without having a conflict with the Conclave."

"And you thought colonizing a planet already claimed by another species was a smart thing to do," Abumwe said.

Rigney spread his hands. "We don't pick the planets," he said. "We just put our people into the colony undercover."

"How many of your people were on Wantji?" Abumwe asked.

"We typically put in a couple of people," Rigney said. "Most wildcat colonies are small. We'll put in one for every fifty colonists or so." He turned to Schmidt. "How many did your friend Wilson wash up?"

Schmidt glanced over at Abumwe, who nodded. "Two, sir," he said.

"That sounds about right," Rigney said. He settled back in his chair.

"What do we do about this?" Abumwe asked.

"And by 'we,' you mean 'you,'" Rigney said.

"Yes," Abumwe said.

"We don't do anything," Egan said. "The Bula haven't brought it up to us."

"We're not going to be the ones to bring it up to them," Rodabaugh said. "If they do ask about the wildcat colony, then we tell them that as

soon as we found out about it, we moved to remove them—so quickly that we didn't ask permission first, so sorry. We'll be out of there before then."

"And if they find out about the CDF members among them?" Abumwe asked.

Rigney pointed at Schmidt. "We have them," he said. "We have them both. More specifically, we have their heads, where their BrainPals are."

Abumwe gawked at the three of them. "You're joking, right?" she said. "The Bula are not that stupid."

"No one said they are stupid," Rigney said. "But all our intelligence suggests that the Bula don't know the wildcat colony was there, and they weren't the ones who attacked it. We're going to proceed with the negotiations as they are."

"And if they ask me directly about it? Contrary to all expectation they might," Abumwe said.

"Then you don't know anything about it," Rodabaugh said.

"To be clear, you're asking me to lie to the Bula," Abumwe said, to Rodabaugh.

"Yes," Rodabaugh said.

"You understand I think this is a bad idea," Abumwe said.

Rodabaugh looked annoyed with Abumwe, but it was Egan who answered. "The directive for this is coming from over all of our heads, Ambassador," she said. "And none of us have the luxury of arguing with it."

"Right," Abumwe said. She got up and walked out of the room without uttering another word.

From their side of the table, Rodabaugh, Egan and Rigney looked over at Schmidt.

"Thanks for coming," he said, tried to smile, and failed.

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Harry Wilson entered the bridge of the *Tubingen;* a surprised Captain Jack Augustyn looked up, along with his executive officer and other bridge crew. He gave them a couple of seconds for their BrainPals to register and label him. Then he said, "I think we're in trouble."

Wilson saw Captain Augustyn have an internal debate whether to jump on him for his unconventional entrance and then make a choice, in the space of half a second. "Explain," he said.

"We have a couple of CDF corpses in the meat locker right now," Wilson said.

"Yes," Augustyn said. "So what?"

"I think there should be another one in there," Wilson said.

"Excuse me?" Augustyn said.

"We have two dead CDF," Wilson said. "I think there was another one in the colony. I've been going through Vasily Ivanovich's data. It's where I found the data stored in a BrainPal-readable format. But some of the documents aren't originally Vasily's. Some of them are from Martina Ivanovich, who forwarded them to Vasily using a BrainPal-to-BrainPal protocol. And some of them are from a guy named Drew Talford. Who also sent them BrainPal to BrainPal."

"We have our people on the planet now, identifying the dead," Augustyn said. "They'll find him."

"They *have* found him," Wilson said. "I wouldn't be bothering you with this if I hadn't already checked."

"If they found him, then what's the problem?" asked Selena Yuan, the *Tubingen*'s executive officer.

"They didn't find *all* of him," Wilson said. "He's missing his head."

"I would imagine a lot of the colonists are missing limbs and body parts," Augustyn said. "They were attacked. And it's been a week since the attack, so scavengers have been at them."

"Lots of them are missing body parts," Wilson agreed, and then sent Augustyn and Yuan an image through his BrainPal. "None of the rest of them are missing a body part that's been cleanly separated from the rest of their body."

There was a moment while Augustyn and Yuan examined the picture. "No one's found the head," Augustyn asked, after a minute.

"No," Wilson said. "I've been having them look intensively for a couple of hours. There are bodies missing heads, but the heads are usually found not too far away, or the separation is ragged. This guy's head isn't near the body. It isn't anywhere."

"Some animal could have run off with it," Yuan suggested.

"It's possible," Wilson said. "On the other hand, when the head of a CDF soldier has been cut cleanly from his body and his head is nowhere to be found, I'd suggest it's not prudent to assume some animal is making a snack of it."

"You assume it's been taken by whoever attacked the colony," Augustyn said.

"Yes," Wilson said. "And while I'm at it, I think that whoever told us that the Bula didn't know the colony was here guessed really badly wrong. I think not only did the Bula know it was here, I'd be guessing they're the ones who made the raid. If they didn't know it was here, I'm willing to bet whoever attacked it took that head to the Bula, because evidence of a CDF presence on one of their planets is worth more than a little bit of cash."

"But they couldn't have known about the CDF presence here," Yuan said. "*We* didn't."

"At this point, I don't think it matters if they did *before,*" Wilson said. "I think it matters that they do *now*. And if they do now—"

"Then they know we're here now," Augustyn said.

"Right," Wilson said. "In which case it's not the colony that's the CU's biggest diplomatic problem at the moment. It's us."

Augustyn was already ignoring Wilson to focus on contacting his ground forces to get them off the planet.

They'd gotten only about half of them up before six Bula warships skipped above Wantji and trained their weapons, already hot, on the *Tubingen*.

• • •

Abumwe's negotiations with Sub-Ambassador Ting were winding down when Schmidt heard a pleasant ping from the sub-ambassador's PDA. Ting excused herself for a moment, picked up the device, appeared to read a note there and performed the Bula equivalent of a smile.

"Good news?" Abumwe asked.

"It might be," Ting said, and set the PDA down. She turned to her assistant, leaned over and spoke quietly into his closest ear. The assistant got up and walked out of the room.

"I apologize, but there are things I will need to conclude our negotiations, and I don't have them with me at the moment," Ting said. "I hope you don't mind waiting a moment while my assistant retrieves them."

"Not at all," Abumwe said.

"Thank you," Ting said. "I think you and I have established a good rapport, Ambassador Abumwe. I wish every negotiating partner I've had could be as pleasant and easy to work with."

"Thank you," Abumwe said. "We have enough issues to deal with without adding unnecessary conflict to the negotiations."

"I agree entirely," Ting said. The door behind her opened and her assistant returned, carrying a medium-sized case, which he set on the table. "And I believe that this common belief will aid us both now."

"What is that?" Abumwe asked, motioning to the case.

"Ambassador, you remember yesterday, when we were talking about Ambassador Zala's appendix," Ting said, ignoring Abumwe's question.

"Yes, of course," Abumwe said.

"I noted to you how it was strange such a small part of a system could threaten the entire health of the whole," Ting said.

"Yes," Abumwe said, looking at the case.

"Then you will understand when I say that what you tell me now, here in our little side room, away from the larger negotiation between the Colonial Union and the Bula, will have an immediate impact on the health of the whole process," Ting said. "I asked for the right to do this, on the grounds that the specifics of our negotiation—the physical visitation of our people between our planets—lent itself to this particular task. All I had to do was wait until we had all the information we needed."

Abumwe smiled. "I'm afraid I'm not entirely following you, Sub-Ambassador Ting."

"I'm very sure that's not true, Ambassador Abumwe," Ting said. "Please tell me what you know about the Colonial Defense Forces presence on Wantji."

"I beg your pardon?" Abumwe said.

"Please tell me what you know about the Colonial Defense Forces presence on Wantji," Ting said.

Schmidt glanced over at his boss and wondered if the tension that he could see in her neck and in her posture would be at all noticeable to an alien not entirely familiar with human physiological cues. "I'm not a member of the Colonial Defense Forces, so I'm not sure that I would be qualified to answer a question about its presence on *any* world," Abumwe said. "But I know people in the CDF who would be better able to answer your question."

"Ambassador, that was a delightfully artful evasion," Ting said. "I couldn't have done it better, were I in your position. But I am afraid I really must insist that you give me a direct answer this time. Please tell me what you know about the Colonial Defense Forces presence on Wantji."

"I can't tell you anything about it," Abumwe said, opening her hands in a *I would help you if I could* gesture.

"'Can't' is a strategically ambiguous word to use here," Ting said. "Can't because you don't know? Or can't because you've been ordered not to say? Perhaps the fault here is mine, Ambassador. I have been too

imprecise in what I've been asking. Let me try again. This is a question that you may answer with a 'yes' or a 'no.' Indeed, I must insist that it is answered with a 'yes' or a 'no.' Ambassador Abumwe, are you personally aware that there was a Colonial Defense Forces presence on Wantji?"

"Sub-Ambassador Ting—," Abumwe began.

"Ambassador Abumwe," Ting said, pleasantly but forcefully, "if I do not receive a 'yes' or 'no' answer to my question, I am afraid I will have to suspend our negotiations. If I suspend my negotiations, then my superiors will suspend theirs. The entire process will fail because you have not been able to offer a simple response to a direct question. I believe I am being perfectly clear about this. So, a final time: Are you personally aware that there was a Colonial Defense Forces presence on Wantji?"

"No," Abumwe said. "I am not aware of that."

Ting smiled a Bula smile and opened her hands in a very humanlike gesture, as if saying, *There, see?* "That's all I needed, Ambassador," she said. "A simple answer to a direct question. Thank you. I do apologize for adding this conflict to our negotiations, and especially sorry to do it to you. As I said, I believe we've had excellent rapport up to now."

Schmidt saw the tension drain out of Abumwe's neck and shoulders. "Thank you for your apology, but it's not necessary. I would just like to finish up our work."

"Oh, we have," Ting said, and stood. Abumwe and Schmidt hastily stood with her. "We finished the moment you lied to me."

"When I lied to you," Abumwe said.

"Yes, just now," Ting said. "Bear in mind, Ambassador Abumwe, I am almost entirely certain that you were ordered to lie to me by your superiors. I have negotiated with enough humans to know what someone being ordered to lie looks like. Nevertheless, you *did* just lie to me, and that was the test, to see whether you would or not. You did."

"Sub-Ambassador Ting, I assure you that whatever you believe I know, my actions should not have an effect on the larger negotiations —," Abumwe said.

Ting held up her hand. "I promise you, Ambassador Abumwe, that your people and mine are not done negotiating," she said. "What we are negotiating, however, has changed substantially." She motioned toward the case. "And now, at last, we come to this."

"What is in the case?" Abumwe asked.

"A gift," Ting said. "Of sorts. It's more accurate to say we're returning something that used to belong to the Colonial Defense Forces. It's actually two objects, one inside the other. We considered removing the second from the first, but then we realized that you—humans, not you personally—could argue the first didn't come from the second. So we felt it best to leave it in place."

"You're being vague," Abumwe said.

"Yes," Ting said. "Perhaps I don't want to ruin the surprise. You may open it if you like."

"I think it might be better if I didn't," Abumwe said.

"Your choice," Ting said. "However, I would appreciate it if you convey to your superiors a message I have from my superiors."

"What is it?" Abumwe asked.

"Tell them that after they've opened that case, when we reconvene, the subject of negotiations will be remuneration for the Colonial Union's illegal Colonial Defense Forces presence in our territory," Ting said. "Not only for the illegal settlement on Wantji, but also the warship we've currently in our custody. The *Tubingen,* I believe it is called."

"You've attacked the *Tubingen*?" Schmidt said, and immediately regretted the lapse.

"No," Ting said, turning to Schmidt, amused. "But we're not letting it go anywhere, either. Its crew will be returned to you eventually. Our new round of negotiations, I believe, will set the price for the return of

the ship itself." She turned back to Abumwe. "You may tell your superiors that as well, Ambassador Abumwe."

Abumwe nodded.

Ting smiled and gathered up her PDA. "And so farewell, Ambassador Abumwe, Mr. Schmidt. Perhaps your next set of negotiations will fare better for you." She left the room, followed by her assistant. The case was left on the table.

Abumwe and Schmidt looked at it. Neither made a move to open it.

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EPISODE FOUR

A Voice in the Wilderness

Albert Birnbaum, the "Voice in the Wilderness" and once the fourth most popular audio talk show host in the United States, told his car to ring his producer. "Are the numbers in?" he asked when she answered, not bothering to introduce himself, because, well. Aside from the caller ID, she would know who he was the second he opened his mouth.

"The numbers are in," Louisa Smart said, to Birnbaum. He imagined her at her desk, headset on, mostly because he almost never saw her in any other context.

"How are they?" Birnbaum asked. "Are they good? Are they better than last month? Tell me they are better than last month."

"Are you sitting down?" Smart asked.

"I'm *driving,* Louisa," Birnbaum said. "Of *course* I'm sitting down."

"You're not supposed to be driving yourself," Smart reminded him. "You've had your manual driving license pulled. If you get pulled over and they check your car's trip monitor and see you have the autodrive off, you're going to get it."

"You're my producer, Louisa," Birnbaum said. "Not my mom. Now quit stalling and give me the numbers."

Smart sighed. "You're down twelve percent from last month," she said.

"What? *Bullshit,* Louisa," Birnbaum said.

"Al, why the hell would I lie to you?" Smart asked. "You think I *like* listening to you panic?"

"That's gotta be bullshit," Birnbaum continued, ignoring Smart's comment. "There's no possible way we can lose one listener in eight in a single goddamn month."

"I don't make up the numbers, Al," Smart said. "I just tell you what they are."

Birnbaum said nothing for a few seconds. Then he started hitting his dashboard, making him swerve on the road. "Shit!" he said. "Shit shit fuck shit shit shittity shit!"

"Sometimes it's amazing to me that you talk for a living," Smart said.

"I'm off the clock," Birnbaum said. "I'm allowed to be inarticulate on my own time."

"These numbers mean that you're down by a third for the year," Smart said. "You're going to miss your ad guarantees. Again. That means we're going to have to do another set of make-goods. Again."

"I know how it works, Louisa," Birnbaum said.

"It means we're going to finish the quarter in the red," Smart said. "That's two quarters out of the last three we're down. You know what *that* means."

"It doesn't mean anything other than we make sure we're in the black next quarter," Birnbaum said.

"Wrong again," Strong said. "It means that Walter puts you on his watch list. And when Walter puts you on the watch list, you're one step away from cancellation. Then that 'Voice in the Wilderness' bit of yours won't just be a clever affectation. You really will be out in the cold."

"Walter's not going to cancel me," Birnbaum said. "I'm his favorite talk show host."

"You remember Bob Arrohead? The guy you replaced? He was Walter's favorite, too," Smart said. "And then he had three bad quarters in a row and he was out on his ass. Walter didn't build a multibillion media empire by being sentimental about his favorites. He'd cancel his grandmother if she had three red quarters in a row."

"I could make it alone if I had to," Birnbaum said. "Run a lean, mean operation on my own. It's totally possible."

"That's what Bob Arrohead does now," Smart said. "You should ask him how that's working out for him. If you can find him. If you can find anyone who knows how to find him."

"Yes, but he doesn't have *you,*" Birnbaum said. He was not above base flattery.

And Smart was not above throwing it back in his face. "And if you get canceled and leave SilverDelta, neither will you," she said. "My contract is with the company, not with you, Al. But thank you so much for the attempted head pat. Where are you, anyway?"

"I'm heading to Ben's soccer match," Birnbaum said.

"Your kid's soccer match doesn't start until four thirty, Al," Smart said. "You need to lie better to someone who has your calendar up on her screen. You're going off to meet the groupie you met at the Broadcasters Association meeting, aren't you?"

"I don't know who you're talking about," Birnbaum said.

Smart sighed, and then Birnbaum heard her count to five, quietly. "You know what? You're right. I'm not your mother," she said. "You want to bang some groupie, *again,* fine with me. Just bear in mind that Walter is not going to be as free with the hush money when you're two quarters in the red as he was when you were his top earner. And remember that you have no prenup, and Judith, unlike your second wife, is *not* stupid, but *you* might be, which is how she maneuvered you into not having a prenup. I hope the validation of your middle-aged ego and three minutes of exercise is worth it."

"I treasure these calls, Louisa," Birnbaum said. "Especially your subtle digs at my sexual technique."

"Spend less time banging groupies and more time on your show, Al," Smart said. "You're not fading because your politics have suddenly gotten unpopular. You're fading because you're getting lazy and bored. You get lazy and bored in this business, and guess what? You're out of the business. And then the groupies dry up."

"Thanks for *that* image," Birnbaum said.

"I'm not kidding, Al," Smart said. "You got a quarter to turn it around. You know it and so do I. You better get to work." She disconnected.

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They caught up to him as he was heading out of the lobby of the hotel. "Mr. Birnbaum," the young man said to him.

Birnbaum held up his hand and tried to keep walking. "Can't sign autographs now," he said. "I'm going to be late for my kid's soccer match."

"I'm not here for an autograph," the young man said to him. "I'm here with a business proposition."

"You can direct those to my manager," Birnbaum said, yelling back to the young man as he blew past. "That's what I pay Chad to do: field business propositions."

"Down twelve percent this month, Mr. Birnbaum?" the young man called out to him as he headed into the revolving door.

Birnbaum took the entire circuit of the revolving door and came back to the young man. "Excuse me?" he said.

"I said, 'Down twelve percent?'" the young man said.

"How do you know about my numbers?" Birnbaum said. "That's proprietary information."

"A talk show host who spends as much time as you do linking to leaked documents and video shouldn't need to ask a question like that," the young man said. "How I know your numbers isn't really the important thing here, Mr. Birnbaum. The important thing here is how I can help you get those numbers up."

"I'm sorry, I have no idea who you are," Birnbaum said. "As a corollary to that, I have no idea why I should care about or listen to you."

"My name is Michael Washington," the young man said. "On my own, I am no one you should particularly care about. The people who I

represent, you might want to listen to."

"And who are they?" Birnbaum said.

"A group who knows the advantage of a mutually beneficial relationship," Washington said.

Birnbaum smiled. "That's it? Are you serious? A shadowy, mysterious group? Look, Michael, I may get traction on conspiracy theories from time to time—they're fun and the listeners love 'em. It doesn't mean I think they actually exist."

"They're neither shadowy nor mysterious," Washington said. "They simply prefer to remain anonymous at this point."

"How nice for them," Birnbaum said. "When they're serious about whatever thing it is they want, and they have *names,* they can talk to Chad. Otherwise you're wasting my time and theirs."

Washington offered Birnbaum his card. "I understand entirely, Mr. Birnbaum, and apologize for taking up your time. However, once you have your meeting with Walter tomorrow, if you change your mind, here's how you can reach me."

Birnbaum didn't take the card. "I don't have a meeting scheduled with Walter tomorrow," he said.

"Just because you don't have it scheduled doesn't mean you're not going to have it," Washington said. He waggled the card slightly.

Birnbaum left without taking it and without looking back at Washington.

He was late for Ben's soccer match. Ben's team lost.

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Birnbaum wrapped up his morning show and was texting his new toy about the possibility of another hotel get-together when he looked up from his PDA and saw Walter Kring, all six feet ten inches of him, standing right in front of him.

"Walter," Birnbaum said, trying not to lose composure at the sight of his boss.

Kring nodded toward Birnbaum's PDA. "Sending a message to Judith?" he asked.

"Pretty much," Birnbaum said.

"Good," Kring said. "She's a great lady, Al. Smartest thing you ever did was marry her. You'd be an idiot to mess with that. You can tell her I said so."

"I'll do that," Birnbaum said. "What brings you down here to the salt mines today, Walter?" SilverDelta's recording studios were on the first two floors of the company's Washington, D.C., building; Walter's offices took up the whole of the fourteenth floor and had a lift to the roof for his helicopter, which he used daily to commute from Annapolis. The CEO of SilverDelta rarely dropped below the tenth floor on any given day.

"I'm firing someone," Kring said.

"Pardon?" Birnbaum's mouth puckered up as if he'd sucked on a block of alum.

"Alice Valenta," Kring said. "We just got the numbers in for the quarter. She's been down too long and she's not coming back up. Time to move on. And you know how I feel about these things, Al. Firing people isn't something you farm out. You should be able to shoot your own dog, you should be able to fire your own people. It's respectful."

"I agree entirely," Birnbaum said.

"I know you do," Kring said. "It's Leadership 101."

Birnbaum swallowed and nodded, suddenly having nothing to say.

"I'm just glad you haven't made me come down here on your behalf, Al," Kring said, leaning over him in a way that he probably couldn't help, being two meters tall, but which made Birnbaum impressively aware just how much he was the beta dog in this particular situation. It took actual force of will not to avert his eyes. "You wouldn't do that to me, would you?" Kring said.

"Of course not, Walter," Birnbaum said. He actually turned on his performance voice to say it, because if he used his normal voice, it would have cracked.

Kring straightened up and clasped Birnbaum on the shoulder. "That's what I like to hear. We should do lunch sometime. It's been far too long."

"I'd like that," Birnbaum lied.

"Fine," Kring said. "I'll have Jason set it up. Sometime next week, probably."

"Great," Birnbaum said.

"Now, you'll have to excuse me, Al," Kring said. "Not every meeting I'm having today is going to be as nice as the one we're having." Birnbaum nodded his assent and Kring wandered off without another word, down the hall to Studio Eight, soon to be Alice Valenta's former work space.

Birnbaum waited until Kring was out of sight and simultaneously exhaled and shuddered. He reached into his pants pocket, ostensibly to retrieve his vehicle fob but in reality to check if he had spotted himself.

Birnbaum's PDA vibrated, alerting him to an incoming text. It read, *When do you want to meet?* Birnbaum started writing back that under further consideration, another hotel meet-up wouldn't work this week, when he realized the text hadn't come from his new toy. He backtracked the text.

Who is this? he wrote, and sent.

It's Michael Washington, was the reply.

How do you know this PDA? Birnbaum sent. It was his private PDA; he was under the impression that the only people who knew the number were Judith, Ben, Louisa Smart and the new toy.

The same way I knew which hotel you were at with that woman who is not your wife, said the response. *You should focus less on that and more on how to save your job, Mr. Birnbaum. Do you want to meet?*

He did.

• • •

They met at Bonner's, which was the sort of wood-paneled bar that people making entertainment shows used when politicians had meetings with shadowy figures.

"Before we do or say anything else, I need to know how you know so much about me," Birnbaum said as Washington sat in his booth, not even bothering with the pleasantries. "You know both my personal and professional business in a way no one else in the world knows or should know."

"Louisa Smart knows," Washington said, mildly.

"So you're getting the information from her?" Birnbaum said. "You're paying my producer to spy on me? Is that it?"

"No, Mr. Birnbaum," Washington said. "After ten years you should know your producer better than that."

"Then how are you doing it? Are you with the government? Our government? Someone else's?" Birnbaum unconsciously slipped into his paranoid rhetoric mode, which brought him much fame in earlier years. "How extensive is the surveillance web on me? Are you monitoring people other than me? How high up does this go? Because I swear to you, I will follow up on this, as far up as it goes. At the risk to *my own life and freedom*."

"Do you really believe there is a government conspiracy against you, Mr. Birmbaum?" Washington said.

"You tell *me,*" Birnbaum said.

Washington held out his PDA. "Your PDA," he said.

"What about my PDA?" Birnbaum said.

"Give it to me for a moment, please," Washington said.

"You bugged my PDA?" Birnbaum exclaimed. "You're tapped into the network at the root!"

"Your PDA, please," Washington said, still extending his hand. Birnbaum gave it to him, with some trepidation. Washington took it, made a few wiping motions, pressed the screen and then handed it back to Birnbaum. He looked at it, confused.

"You're showing me the *Voice in the Wilderness* 'gram," he said.

"Yes," Washington said. "The free 'gram you give out so people can listen to your show and then send text or voice comments, along with location tags so you know where the comments are from, geographically, when you read or play them on air. Which means your 'gram has the ability to send and receive audio and also track your movements. And because you had it built cheaply by flat-rate coders who make their money banging out 'grams like yours fast and sloppy, it's incredibly easy to hack into."

"Wait," Birnbaum said. "You used *my own 'gram* against me?"

"Yes," Washington said. "You get what you pay for with coders, Mr. Birnbaum."

"What about Walter?" Birnbaum said. "You said I would have a meeting with him and I did. How did you know that?"

"The monthly numbers were in," Washington said. "The quarter was ending. There were show hosts who have been lagging. Kring is famous for firing people face-to-face. So I made a guess. Work the odds, Mr. Birnbaum, on the chance you might see Walter Kring today. And since I put the suggestion into your head that you'd have a meeting, any encounter you might have would qualify. After that, it just took monitoring your PDA to catch you after the 'meeting' took place."

Birnbaum put his PDA away, a certain look on his face.

Washington caught it. "You're disappointed, aren't you," he said. "That I'm *not* from the government. That there's not a global conspiracy following you."

"Don't be stupid," Birnbaum said. "I already told you that I don't personally go in for that stuff." His expression was unchanged.

"I do apologize," Washington said. "I'm sorry I'm not more nefarious or well connected into the murky corners of national and global politics."

"Then who are you?" Birnbaum said.

"As I've told you before, I represent a group who wants to offer you a solution to your current set of problems," Washington said.

Birnbaum almost asked, *Who are your clients, really?* but was distracted by what Washington said. "And what exactly is my problem?"

"Namely, that you're shedding listeners at an accelerating rate on your way to becoming a has-been in the national political conversation," Washington said.

Birnbaum thought about arguing that assertion but realized that would not actually get him any answers, so he let it go. "And how do your friends propose to fix that?" he asked instead.

"By suggesting a topic for you to consider," Washington said.

"Is this a bribe?" Birnbaum asked. "A payment for espousing a certain view? Because I don't do that." He had in fact done it, once or twice or ten or more times, in deals that were in point of fact often negotiated at Bonner's. Birnbaum squared it with his morals by figuring they were usually things he was likely to say anyway, so what he was doing was merely illegal, not unethical. However, one always led with being nonbribable. It gave those attempting to bribe a sense of accomplishment.

"There is no money to be exchanged," Washington said.

Birnbaum made that face again. Washington laughed. "Mr. Birnbaum, you have more than enough money. For now, at least. What my clients are offering is something much more valuable: the ability to not only climb back up to the position of fame and personal power that you held not too long ago, but to exceed it. You were the number four audio talker in the land once, although not for very long. My clients are offering you a chance to go to number one and stay there, for as long as you want to be there."

"And how are they going to manage that?" Birnbaum wanted to know.

"Mr. Birnbaum, I assume, given your profession, you know who William Randolph Hearst was," Washington said.

"He was a newspaper publisher," Birnbaum said. That was the extent of his knowledge; Birnbaum's knowledge of American history

was solid regarding the founding and the last fifty years, and everything else was a bit of a blank.

"Yes," Washington said. "A newspaper publisher. In the late 1800s the United States and Spain were warming up for a war over Cuba, and Hearst sent an illustrator to Cuba to make pictures of the event. When the illustrator got there, he sent a telegram to Hearst saying that as far as he could see, there was no war coming and that he was going home. Hearst sent back that he should stay and said, 'You furnish the pictures, and I will furnish the war.' And he did."

Birnbaum looked at Washington blankly.

"Mr. Birnbaum, my clients need someone to furnish the pictures, as it were," Washington said. "Someone to start a discussion. Once the discussion starts, my clients can take care of the rest. But it has to start and it has to start somewhere other than with my clients."

"I furnish the pictures and they will furnish the war," Birnbaum said. "What's the war, here?"

"Not a real war," Washington said. "And indeed, what you'd be saying could prevent a real war."

Birnbaum thought about this. "No money, though," he said.

Washington smiled. "No," he said. "Just audience, fame and power. Money often follows those, however."

"And you can guarantee the first three," Birnbaum said.

"Furnish the pictures, Mr. Birnbaum," Washington said, "and the war comes. Pretty damn quickly, too, I would add."

• • •

Birnbaum's opportunity to furnish the pictures came the very next day.

"Can we talk about world government?" Jason from Canoga Park was saying to Birnbaum. Jason from Canoga Park was one of Birnbaum's most reliable listeners in that sooner or later everything came back to world government, the fear of world government and how whatever topic was the subject of discussion would eventually lead

to world government. You could set your world government clock by Jason from Canoga Park.

"I love talking about world government, Jason, you know that," Birnbaum said, more or less on automatic. "How is it coming this time?"

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it?" Jason said. "Right now the big discussion is whether or not we should resume diplomatic relations with the Colonial Union. Note the 'we' there, Al. It's not 'we' as in 'we the United States,' is it? No, it's not. It's 'we' as in 'we the people of Earth.' Which just means 'we the world government of Earth, which is being constituted in secret, right under your nose.' Every day we talk about relations with the Colonial Union, every day we discuss whether to send diplomats to the Colonial Union, is a day the tentacles of the world government constrict further on the throat of individual freedom, Al."

"It's a compelling point, Jason," Birnbaum said, using the phrase that in his mind meant *You are completely full of shit, but arguing with you would be pointless, so I am going to change the subject on you,* "and you bring up a topic which has been on my mind a lot recently, which is the Colonial Union. Have you been following the official narrative on the CU, Jason?"

"As it relates to world government?" Jason asked.

"Sure," Birnbaum said, "and every other topic, too. The official narrative, the one the government is fronting and all the other governments fell in line behind, is that for—what? two hundred years?—the Colonial Union has been holding back the people of Earth. It's been keeping us from leaving the planet except under its own terms, using us to farm soldiers and colonists, and keeping us down by not sharing its technology and understanding of our place in the universe. And you know what, Jason? Despite everything this particular administration in Washington has been wrong about over the last six years, and there's been a *lot,* that's fair. Those are fair points to make.

"But they're also the *wrong* points to make. They are the *myopic* points to make. They are—should we say it? dare we say it? let's go ahead and say it—they are the *politically advantageous* points for this administration to make. Look at the facts. What's the U.S. economic growth been for the last three or four years? Come on, people, it's been in the Dumpster. You know this. I know this. Everyone knows this. And why has it been in the Dumpster? Because of the economic policies of this administration, hundreds of millions of decent Americans, the ones that wake up every morning and go to work and do what they're supposed to do, do what we ask them to do—people like you and me, Jason—well … we're hurting, aren't we? We are. Every day of the year.

"Now we come to the point where our beloved leader, the resident in the White House, can no longer hide under the canard of a so-called global economic downturn, and has to face the music with the American people about his policies. And then, like a miracle from the skies, here comes John Perry and that Conclave fleet, telling us that the Colonial Union, *not* the president, *not* the administration's policies, *not* the so-called global recession, is the root of our woes. How *convenient* for our beloved leader, don't you think, Jason?"

By this time, Louisa Smart was tapping on the glass from the control room. Birnbaum looked over. *What the hell?* Smart mouthed silently. Birnbaum held up his hands placatingly, to say, *Don't worry, I've got this.*

"I'm not sure what this has to do with the world government," Jason said, doubtfully.

"Well, it's got *everything* to do with the world government, doesn't it, Jason?" Birnbaum said. "For the last several months we're not talking about anything *but* the Colonial Union, and what we should do concerning the Colonial Union, and what we should do about the Colonial Union, and whether it can be trusted. Every day we talk about the Colonial Union is a day that we don't talk about our own needs, our own problems, and the faults of our own government—and the

current administration. I say it's time to change the discussion. I say it's time to change the official narrative. I say it's time to get to the truth, rather than the spin.

"And here's the truth. I'm going to give it to you now. And it's not going to be popular because it's going to run maybe a little counter to what the official narrative is, and we know how protective the administration and its little enablers in the media are about the official narrative, don't we? But here's the truth, and just, you know, try it on for size and see how you like the fit.

"The Colonial Union? It's the best thing that ever happened to the planet Earth. Hands down, no contest, no silver or bronze. Yes, it kept the Earth in its own protective bubble. But have you seen the reports? In our local neighborhood of space, there are, what? Six hundred intelligent alien species, almost all of whom have attacked humans in some way, including John Perry's hallowed Conclave, which would have wiped out a whole planetary colony if the Colonial Union hadn't stopped them? If you think they would wipe out a colony, what makes you think any of them would spare the Earth if they thought we were important?

"And you say, Well, fine, the Colonial Union kept us *safe,* but it also kept space from us Earthlings unless we became soldiers or colonists. But think about what that means—it means every person who went into space from Earth filled a role designed to protect humanity out there in the stars, or to build humanity's place in the stars. You know that I take no backseat to anyone in my praise and honor of those who serve this nation in uniform. Why should I do any less for those who serve in a uniform that protects all of humankind, including those of us here on Earth? Our people—*Earthlings*, ladies and gentlemen—are the ones the Colonial Union turns to when it comes time to keep us *all* alive. The official narrative calls it *slavery*. I call it *duty*. When I turn seventy-five, do I want to sit here on Earth in a rocking chair, napping my days away until I kick off? Hell, no! Paint me green and put me in space! This administration isn't *protecting* me

from the Colonial Union by keeping me or anyone else from joining the Colonial Defense Forces. It's *threatening the survival of all of us* by starving the one organization designed to keep all of us safe!

"And I know there are still some of you out there clinging to the official narrative, saying to me, Well, it kept us down technologically and socially, didn't it? I ask you, did it? Did it really? Or did it make it so that we, out of all humans anywhere, are the ones totally technologically self-sufficient? We don't have the advantage of seeing how other alien races do things. If we want something, we have to build it ourselves. We have a knowledge base no other species can hope to match because they spend all their time poaching technology from everyone else! And far from controlling us, the Colonial Union left us here on Earth alone to pursue our own political and national destinies. Jason, do you think that if the Colonial Union hadn't had our backs all this time, that we could have avoided a world government? That people wouldn't have been screaming for a world government in the face of almost certain alien race subjugation?"

"Uh—," Jason began.

"You know they would have," Birnbaum continued. "And maybe some people want the same government here that they have in Beijing and New Delhi and Cairo and Paris, but I don't. Are we so naïve as to believe the world government that we have would be like the one right here in America? Hell, this administration has been busy enough trying to trade in our rights to make us more like everyone else!

"So I say, throw out the official narrative, people. Get with the truth. The truth is, the Colonial Union hasn't been keeping us down. It's been keeping us free. The longer we delude ourselves into thinking otherwise, the closer we are to doom as a species. And maybe I don't have all the answers—I'm just a guy talking on a show, after all—but I do know that at the end of the day, humanity needs to fight to stay alive in the universe. I want to stand with the fighters. Where do you stand, people? That's the question I want to talk about when we come

back from the commercial break. Jason from Canoga Park, thanks for calling in."

"I have one more point—"

Birnbaum closed the circuit and shut Jason down, then threw to Louisa Smart for the commercials.

"Okay, seriously, what the hell was *that*?" Smart said, over the headset. "Since when do you have a bug in your ass about the Colonial Union?"

"You said you wanted me to spend more time thinking about how to turn the show around," Birnbaum said.

"You think championing the group that's been pissing on Earth for two hundred years is a winning strategy for that?" Smart said. "I question your judgment, more than I usually do."

"Trust me, Louisa," Birnbaum said. "This is going to work."

"You don't actually believe what you just spouted, do you?" Smart said.

"If it gets the numbers up, I believe every goddamned word of it," Birnbaum said. "And for the sake of your job, Louisa, so should you."

"I have a job whether you're here or not," Smart reminded him. "So I think I'll keep my own opinion out of the 'sale' rack, if it's all the same to you." She looked down at her monitor and made a face.

"What is it?" Birnbaum asked.

"It looks like you pinked *somebody,*" Smart said. "I've got a caller here from Foggy Bottom. It's not every day we have someone from the State Department calling in, that's for sure."

"Are we sure it's from the State Department?" Birnbaum asked.

"I'm checking the name right now," Smart said. "Yup. It's a deputy undersecretary for space affairs. Small fry in the grand scheme of things."

"Doesn't matter," Birnbaum said. "Get him on when we come back. I'm going to light him up."

"Her," Smart said.

"Whatever," Birnbaum said, and girded himself for battle.

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Having furnished the pictures, Birnbaum fully expected Washington's clients to furnish a war. What he wasn't expecting was a blitzkrieg.

Birnbaum's show numbers for the day were actually about 1 percent below average; fewer than a million people heard his rant live, streamed to the listening implement of their choice. Within ten minutes of the rant, however, the archived version of the rant started picking up listeners. Relatively slowly at first, the archived version's numbers began to climb as more political sites linked in. Within two hours, the archived version reached another million people. Within three, it was two million. Within four, four million. The show archive's hits grew at a roughly geometric rate for several hours afterward. Overnight there were seven million downloads of the *Voice in the Wilderness* PDA 'gram. By the next day's show—a show devoted entirely to the subject of the Colonial Union, as were the next several shows—the live audience was 5.2 million. By the end of the week, it was twenty million live streams per show.

Like a crack in an overburdened dam, Birnbaum's pro–Colonial Union rant created a rapid collapse in a polite silence from various political quarters, followed by a swamping flood of agreement with Birnbaum's vituperation for the current administration position of holding the Colonial Union at arm's length. Birnbaum had occupied a sweet spot in the media discourse—not so influential that he was unable to promote a potentially unpopular (and possibly crazy) theory, but not so obscure that he could be dismissed outright as a kook. Too many Washington insiders, politicians and journalists knew him too well for that.

The administration, wholly unprepared for the tsunami of opposing views on this particular topic, flubbed its immediate response to Birnbaum and his followers, beginning with the unfortunately clueless deputy undersecretary for space affairs who had called in to Birnbaum's show, who was so thoroughly dismantled by Birnbaum that three days

later she tendered her resignation and headed to her home state of Montana, where she would eventually become a high school history teacher.

At least she was well out of it. The government's response was so poorly done that for several days its hapless handling of the event threatened to eclipse the discussion of the Colonial Union itself.

Threatened but did not eclipse, in part because Birnbaum, who knew a good break when he saw one, simply wouldn't let it. From his newly elevated vantage point, Birnbaum dispensed opinion, gathered useful tidbits of information from insiders who, two weeks before, wouldn't have given him the time of day, and set the daily agenda for discussion on the topic of the Colonial Union.

Others attempted to seize the issue from him, of course. Rival talk show hosts, stunned by his sudden ascendancy, claimed the Colonial Union topic for their own but could not match his head start; even the (formerly) more influential show hosts looked like also-rans on the subject. Eventually, all but the most oblivious of them ceded supremacy on the topic to him and focused on other subjects. Politicians would try to change the subject; Birnbaum would either get them on the show to serve his purposes or harangue them when they wouldn't set foot into his studio.

Either way the subject was his, and he milked it for all it was worth, carefully tweaking his message for statesmanlike effect. No, of course the Colonial Union should not be excused for keeping us in the dark, he would say, but we have to understand the context in which that decision was made. No, we should never be subjugated to the Colonial Union or be just another colony in their union, he'd say other times, but there were distinct advantages in an alliance of equal partners. Of course we should consider the Conclave's positions and see what advantages talking to it holds for us, he'd say still other times, but should we also forget we are human? To whom, at the end of the day, do we truly owe our allegiance, if not our own species?

Every now and again, Louisa Smart would ask him if he truly believed the things he was saying to his new, widely expanded audience. Birnbaum would refer her to his original answer to the question. Eventually Smart stopped asking.

The new monthlies came in. Live audience of the show was up 2,500 percent. Archived show up a similar number. Forty million downloads of the PDA 'gram. Birnbaum called his agent and told her to renegotiate his latest contract with SilverDelta. She did, despite the fact it had been negotiated less than two years earlier. Walter Kring might have been a six-foot-ten-inch alpha male right through to his bones, but he was strangely terrified of Monica Blaustein, persistent Jewish grandmother from New York, five feet tall in her flats. He could also read a ratings sheet and knew a gold mine when he saw it.

Birnbaum's life became the show and sleeping. His thing on the side, miffed at the inattention, dropped him. His relationship with Judith, his third wife, the smart one, the one who had maneuvered him out of the prenup, became commensurately better in nearly all respects. His son Ben's soccer team actually won a soccer game. Birnbaum didn't feel he could really take credit for that last one.

"This isn't going to last," Smart pointed out to him two months into the ride.

"What is it with you?" Birnbaum asked her. "You're a downer."

"It's called being a realist, Al," she said. "I'm delighted that everything's coming up roses for you at the moment. But you're a single-issue show right now. And no matter what, the fact is this issue is going to get solved one way or another in the not-all-that-distant future. And then where will you be? You will be last month's fad. I know you have a shiny new contract and all, but Kring will still cut your ass if you have three bad quarters in a row. And now, for better or worse, you have much, much further to fall."

"I like that you think I don't know that," Birnbaum said. "Fortunately for the both of us, I am taking steps to deal with that."

"Do tell," Smart said.

"The Rally," Birnbaum said, making sure the capital "R" was evident in his voice.

"Ah, the rally," Smart said, omitting the capital. "This is the rally on the Mall in support of the Colonial Union, which you have planned for two weeks from now."

"Yes, that one," Birnbaum said.

"You'll note that the subject of the rally is the Colonial Union," Smart said. "Which is to say, that single issue that you're not branching out from."

"It's not what the Rally is about," Birnbaum said. "It's who is going to be there with me. I've got both the Senate majority leader and House minority leader up there on the stage with me. I've been cultivating my relationships with them for the last six weeks, Louisa. They've been feeding me all sorts of information, because we have midterms coming up. They want the House back and I'm going to be the one to get it for them. So after the Rally, we begin the shift away from the Colonial Union and back to matters closer to home. We'll ride the Colonial Union thing as long as we can, of course. But this way, when that horse rides into the sunset I'm still in a position to influence the political course of the nation."

"As long as you don't mind being a political party's cabana boy," Smart said.

"I prefer 'unofficial agenda setter' myself," Birnbaum said. "And if I deliver this election, then I think I'll be able to call myself something else. It's all upside."

"Is this the part where I stand at your side as you roll into Rome in triumph, whispering 'Remember thou art mortal' into your ear?" Smart asked.

"I don't entirely get the reference," Birnbaum said. His world history knowledge was marginally worse than his United States history knowledge.

Smart rolled her eyes. "Of course not," she said. "Remember it anyway, Al. It might come in handy one day."

Birnbaum made a note to remember it but forgot because he was busy with his show, the Rally and everything that would follow after it. It came back to him briefly on the day of the Rally, when, after stirring fifteen-minute speeches from the House minority leader and the Senate majority leader, Birnbaum ascended the podium and stood at the lectern on the stage of the Rally, looking out at a sea of seventy thousand faces (fewer than the one hundred thousand faces they had been hoping for, but more than enough, and anyway they'd round up because it was all estimates in any event). The faces, mostly male, mostly middle-aged, looked up at him with admiration and fervor and the knowledge that they were part of something bigger, something that he, Albert Birnbaum, had started.

Remember thou art mortal, Birnbaum heard Louisa Smart say in his head. He smiled at it; Louisa wasn't at the Rally because of a wedding. He'd rib her about it later. Birnbaum brought up his notes on the lectern monitor and opened his mouth to speak and then was deeply confused when he was facedown on the podium, gasping like a fish and feeling sticky from the blood spurting out of what remained of his shoulder. His ears registered a crack, as if distant thunder were finally catching up with lightning, then he heard screams and the sound of seventy thousand panicked people trying to run, and then blacked out.

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Birnbaum looked up and saw Michael Washington looking down at him.

"How did you get in here?" Birnbaum asked, after he had taken a couple of minutes to remember who he was (Albert Birnbaum), where he was (Washington Sacred Heart Catholic Hospital), what time it was (2:47 a.m.) and why he was there (he'd been shot).

Washington pointed with a gloved hand to the badge on his chest, and Birnbaum realized Washington was in a police uniform. "That's not real," Birnbaum protested.

"Actually it is," Washington said. "I usually work plain clothes, but this was useful for the moment."

"I thought you were some sort of *facilitator,*" Birnbaum said. "You have *clients*."

"I am and I do," Washington said. "Some cops tend bar on the side. This is what I do."

"You're joking," Birnbaum said.

"That's entirely possible," Washington said.

"Why are you here now?" Birnbaum asked.

"Because we have unfinished business," Washington said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Birnbaum said. "You asked me to pimp a pro–Colonial Union story. I did that."

"And you did a fine job with it," Washington said. "Although at the end things were beginning to flag. You had fewer people at your rally than you had anticipated."

"We had a hundred thousand," Birnbaum said, weakly.

"No," Washington said. "But I appreciate you making the effort there."

Birnbaum's mind began to wander, but he focused on Washington again. "So what unfinished business do we have?" he asked.

"You dying," Washington said. "You were supposed to have been assassinated at the rally, but our marksman didn't make the shot. He blamed it on a gust of wind between him and the target. So it fell to me."

Birnbaum was confused. "Why do you want me dead? I did what you asked."

"And again, you did a fine job," Washington said. "But now the discussion needs to be brought to another level. Making you a martyr to the cause will do that. Nothing like a public assassination to embed the topic into the national consciousness."

"I don't understand," Birnbaum said, increasingly confused.

"I know," Washington said. "But you never understood, Mr. Birnbaum. You didn't want to understand all that much, I think. You

never even really cared who I worked for. All you were interested in was what I was dangling in front of you. You never took your eyes off that."

"Who *do* you work for?" Birnbaum croaked.

"I work for the Colonial Union, of course," Washington said. "They needed some way to change the conversation. Or, alternately, I work for Russians and the Brazilians, who are upset that the United States is taking the lead in the international discussions about the Colonial Union and wanted to disrupt its momentum. No, I work for the political party not in the White House, who was looking to change the election calculus. Actually, all of those were lies: I work for a cabal who wants to form a world government."

Birnbaum bulged his eyes at him, disbelieving.

"The time to have demanded an answer was before you took the job, Mr. Birnbaum," Washington said. "Now you'll never know." He held up a syringe. "You woke up because I injected you with this. It's shutting down your nervous system as we speak. It's intentionally obvious. We want it to be clear you were assassinated. There are enough clues planted in various places for a merry chase. You'll be even more famous now. And with that fame will come influence. Not that *you* will be able to use it, of course. But others will, and that will be enough. Fame, power and an audience, Mr. Birnbaum. It's what you were promised. It's what you were given."

Birnbaum said nothing to this; he'd died midmonologue. Washington smiled, planted the syringe in Birnbaum's bed and walked out of the room.

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"They have the assassin on video," Jason from Canoga Park said, to Louisa Smart, who had taken over the show, temporarily, for the memorial broadcast. "They have him on video injecting him and talking to him before he died. That was when it happened. When he revealed the plot of the world government."

“We can’t know that,” Smart said, and for the millionth time wondered how Birnbaum managed to talk to his listeners without wanting to crawl down the stream to strangle them. “The video is low resolution and has no audio. We’ll never know what they had to say to each other.”

“What else could it be?” Jason said. “Who else could have managed it?”

“It’s a compelling point, Jason,” Smart said, preparing to switch over to the next caller and whatever *their* cockamamie theory would be.

“I’m going to miss Al,” Jason said, before she could unplug him. “He called himself the Voice in the Wilderness. But if he was, we were all in the wilderness with him. Who will be that voice now? Who will call to us? And what will they say?”

Smart had no good answer to that. She just went to the next caller instead.

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EPISODE FIVE

Tales from the *Clarke*

"So, Captain Coloma," Department of State Deputy Undersecretary Jamie Maciejewski said. "It's not every starship captain who intentionally maneuvers her ship into the path of a speeding missile."

Captain Sophia Coloma set her jaw and tried very hard not to crack her own molars while doing so. There were a number of ways she expected this final inquiry into her actions in the Danavar system to go. This being the opening statement was not one of them.

In Coloma's head a full list of responses, most not in the least appropriate for the furtherance of her career, scrolled past. After several seconds, she found one she could use. "You have my full report on the matter, sir," she said.

"Yes, of course," Maciejewski said, and then indicated with a hand State Department Fleet Commander Lance Brode and CDF liaison Elizabeth Egan, who with Maciejewski constituted the final inquiry panel. "We have your full report. We also have the reports of your XO, Commander Balla, of Ambassador Abumwe, and of Harry Wilson, the Colonial Defense Forces adjunct on the *Clarke* at the time of the incident."

"We also have the report of Shipmaster Gollock," Brode said. "Outlining the damage the *Clarke* took from the missile. I'll have you know she was quite impressed with you. She tells me that the fact that you managed to get the *Clarke* back to Phoenix Station at all is a minor miracle; by all rights the ship should have cracked in half from material stresses during the ship's acceleration to skip distance."

"She also says that the damage to the *Clarke* is extensive enough that repairs will take longer to make than it would take for us to just build an entire new Robertson-class diplomatic ship," Maciejewski said. "It would possibly be more expensive to boot."

"And then there is the matter of the lives you put at risk," Egan said. "The lives of your crew. The lives of the diplomatic mission to the Utche. More than three hundred people, all told."

"I minimized the risk as much as possible," Coloma said. *In the roughly thirty seconds I had to make a plan,* she thought but did not say.

"Yes," Egan said. "I read your report. And there were no deaths from your actions. There were, however, casualties, several serious and life-threatening."

What do you want from me? Coloma felt like barking at the inquiry panel. The *Clarke* wasn't supposed to have been in the Danavar system to begin with; the diplomatic team on it was chosen at the last minute to replace a diplomatic mission to the Utche that had gone missing and was presumed dead. When the *Clarke* arrived they discovered traps had been set for the Utche, using stolen Colonial Union missiles that would make it look as if the humans had attacked their alien counterparts. Harry Wilson—Coloma had to keep in check some choice opinions just thinking the name—took out all but one of the missiles by using the *Clarke*'s shuttle as a decoy, destroying the shuttle and nearly killing himself in the process. Then the Utche arrived and Coloma had no choice other than to draw the final missile to the *Clarke,* rather than have it home in on the Utche ship, strike it and start a war the Colonial Union couldn't afford at the moment.

What do you want from me? Coloma asked again in her mind. She wouldn't ask the question; she couldn't afford to give the inquiry panel that sort of opening. She had no doubt they would tell her, and that it would be something other than what she had done.

So instead she said, "Yes, there were casualties."

"They might have been avoided," Egan said.

"Yes," Coloma said. "I could have avoided them entirely by allowing the missile—a Colonial Union Melierax Series Seven—to hit the Utche ship, which would have been unprepared and unready for the attack. That strike would have likely crippled the ship, if it did not destroy it outright, and would have caused substantial casualties, including potentially scores of deaths. That seemed the less advisable course of action."

"No one disputes your actions spared the Utche ship considerable damage, and the Colonial Union an uncomfortable diplomatic incident," Maciejewski said.

"But there still is the matter of the ship," Brode said.

"I'm well aware of the matter of the *Clarke,*" Coloma said. "It's my ship."

"Not anymore," Brode said.

"Pardon?" Coloma said. She dug her fingernails into her palms to keep herself from leaping across the room to grab Brode by the collar.

"You've been relieved of your command of the *Clarke,*" Brode said. "The determination has been made to scrap the ship. Command has been transferred to the port crew that will disassemble it. This is all standard practice for scrapped ships, Captain. It's not a reflection on your service."

"Yes, sir," Coloma said, and doubted that. "What is my next command? And what is the disposition of my staff and crew?"

"In part, that's what this inquiry is about, Captain Coloma," Egan said, and glanced over at Brode, coolly. "It's regrettable that you had to learn about the disposition of your ship in this way, in this forum. But now that you do know, you should know what we're going to decide is not what we think about what you did, but where we think you should go next. Do you understand the difference here?"

"With apologies, ma'am, I'm not entirely sure I do," Coloma said. Her entire body was coated in a cold sweat that accompanied the realization that she was now a captain without a ship, which meant in a

very real sense she was no longer a captain at all. Her body wanted to shiver, to shake off the clamminess she felt. She didn't dare.

"Then understand that the best thing you can do now is to help us understand your thinking at every step in your actions," Egan said. "We have your report. We know what you did. We want a better idea of the why."

"You know the why," Coloma said before she could stop, and almost immediately regretted it. "I did it to stop a war."

"We all agree you stopped a war," Maciejewski said. "We have to decide whether how you did it justifies giving you another command."

"I understand," Coloma said. She would not admit any defeat into her voice.

"Very good," Maciejewski said. "Then let's begin at the decision to let the missile hit your ship. Let's take it second by second, shall we."

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The *Clarke,* like other large ships, did not dock with Phoenix Station directly. It was positioned a small distance away, in the section of station devoted to repair. Coloma stood at the edge of the repair transport bay, watching crews load into the work shuttles that would take them to the *Clarke,* to strip the ship of anything and everything valuable or salvageable before cutting down the hull itself into manageable plates to be recycled into something else entirely—another ship, structural elements for a space station, weapons or perhaps foil to wrap leftovers in. Coloma smiled wryly at the idea of a leftover bit of steak being wrapped in the skin of the *Clarke,* and then she stopped smiling.

She had to admit that in the last couple of weeks she'd gotten very good at making herself depressed.

In her peripheral vision, Coloma saw someone walking up to her. She knew without turning that it was Neva Balla, her executive officer. Balla had a hitch in her gait, an artifact, so Balla claimed, of an equestrian injury in her youth. The practical result of it was that there

was no doubt of her identity when she came up on you. Balla could be wearing a bag on her head and Coloma would know it was her.

"Having one last look at the *Clarke*?" Balla asked Coloma as she walked up.

"No," Coloma said; Balla looked at her quizzically. "She's no longer the *Clarke*. When they decommissioned her, they took her name. Now she's just CUDS-RC-1181. For whatever time it takes to render her down to parts, anyway."

"What happens to the name?" Balla asked.

"They put it back into the rotation," Coloma said. "Some other ship will have it eventually. That is, if they don't decide to retire it for being too ignominious."

Balla nodded, but then motioned to the ship. "*Clarke* or not, she was still your ship."

"Yes," Coloma said. "Yes, she was."

The two stood there silently for a moment, watching the shuttles angle toward what used to be their ship.

"So what did you find out?" Coloma asked Balla after a moment.

"We're still on hold," Balla said. "All of us. You, me, the senior staff of the *Clarke*. Some of the crew have been reassigned to fill holes in other ship rosters, but almost no officers and none of those above the rank of lieutenant junior grade."

Coloma nodded. The reassignment of her crew would normally come through her, but technically speaking they were no longer her crew and she no longer their captain. Balla had friends in the Department of State's higher reaches, or more accurately, she had friends who were assistants and aides to the department's higher reaches. It worked out the same, information wise. "Do we have any idea why no one important's been reassigned?"

"They're still doing their investigation of the Danavar incident," Balla said.

"Yes, but in our crew that only involves you and me and Marcos Basquez," Coloma said, naming the *Clarke*'s chief engineer. "And

Marcos isn't being investigated like the two of us are."

"It's still easier to have us around," Balla said. "But there's another wrinkle to it as well."

"What's that?" Coloma asked.

"The *Clarke*'s diplomatic team hasn't been formally reassigned, either," Balla said. "Some of them have been added on to existing missions or negotiations in a temporary capacity, but none of them has been made permanent."

"Who did you hear this from?" Coloma asked.

"Hart Schmidt," Balla said. "He and Ambassador Abumwe were attached to the Bula negotiations last week."

Coloma winced at this. The Bula negotiations had gone poorly, in part because the Colonial Defense Forces had established a clandestine base on an underdeveloped Bula colony world and had gotten caught red-handed trying to evacuate it; that was the rumor, in any event. Abumwe and Schmidt having anything to do with that would not look good for them.

"So we're all in limbo," Coloma said.

"It looks like," Balla said. "At least you're not being singled out, ma'am."

Coloma laughed at this. "Not singled out, but being punished, that's for sure."

"I don't know why we would be punished," Balla said. "We were dropped into a diplomatic process at the last minute, discovered a trap, and kept the trap from snapping shut. All without a single death. And the negotiations with the Utche were successfully completed on top of that. They give people medals for less."

Coloma motioned to what used to be the *Clarke*. "Maybe they were just very attached to the ship."

Balla smiled. "It seems unlikely," she said.

"Why not?" Coloma said. "I was."

"You did the right thing, Captain," Balla said, becoming serious. "I said so to the investigators. So did Ambassador Abumwe and

Lieutenant Wilson. If they don't see that, to hell with them."

"Thank you, Neva," Coloma said. "It's good of you to say that. Remember it when they assign us to a tow barge."

"There are worse assignments," Balla said.

Coloma was about to respond when her PDA pinged. She swiped to her message queue and read the mail there. Then she shut down the screen, put the PDA away and returned her gaze to what used to be the *Clarke*.

Balla watched her captain for a moment. "You're killing me over here," she finally said.

"Remember when you said that there are worse assignments than a tow barge?" Coloma said, to her XO.

"Considering it's the second to last thing I said, yes," Balla said. "Why?"

"Because we may have just gotten one of those assignments," Coloma said.

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"The ship was the *Porchester,*" Colonel Abel Rigney said. "At least for its first thirty years of service, when it was a Hampshire-class corvette in the CDF. Then it was transferred to the Department of State and renamed the *Ballantine,* after an old secretary of the department. That was another twenty years of service as a courier and supply ship. It was decommissioned last year."

Coloma stood on the bridge with Rigney and Balla and looked over the quiet banks of monitors. The atmosphere on the ship was thin and cold, befitting a ship that no longer had a crew or a purpose. "Any immediate reason for the decommissioning?" she asked.

"Other than age? No," Rigney said. "She ran fine. *Runs* fine, as you'll discover when you put her through her paces. She's just old. There are a lot of klicks on this ship, and eventually being on her began to look like a hardship assignment."

"Hmmm," Coloma said.

"But it's all a matter of perspective, isn't it," Rigney said, quickly, moving past the implied but unintentional insult he'd just offered Coloma. "If you're new to space travel, and don't have your own fleet of ships, then what you and I see as old and past its prime will look shiny and new. The folks from Earth who we are proposing to sell this ship to are going to look at this baby as their first step into the wider universe. It's right about their speed."

"So that's my job," Coloma said. "Take a hand-me-down and convince the rubes they're getting something that's top of the line."

"I wouldn't put it like that, Captain," Rigney said. "We're not trying to deceive the folks from Earth. They know we're not offering them the latest technology. But they also know they're not trained and ready to handle our latest ships. The only real spacefaring tech they've had to this point are shuttlecraft working around the space station over their planet. We've handled everything else up to now."

"So we're giving them a ship with training wheels on it," Coloma said.

"We prefer to think of it as that we're offering them a classic piece of technology to learn on and build from," Rigney said. "You know the Earth folks aren't happy with the Colonial Union right now."

Coloma nodded; that was common knowledge. And she couldn't blame them. If she were from Earth and discovered that the Colonial Union had been using the entire planet as a farm for soldiers and colonists, she'd be pissed at it, too.

"What you probably don't know is that the Earth folks aren't just talking to us," Rigney said. "The Conclave has been very aggressively courting them, too. It would be very bad for the Colonial Union if Earth decided to join the Conclave, and not just because we'd be fresh out of colonists and CDF. This ship is one of the ways we're hoping to get back on their good side."

"Then why are you selling it to them, sir?" Balla asked. "Why not just give it to them?"

"We're already gifting the Earth folks lots of other technology," Rigney said. "We don't want to start looking like we're offering reparations. And anyway, the governments of Earth are suspicious of us. They're worried that we're offering up Trojan horses to them. If we make them pay for this ship, they're more likely to trust us. Don't ask me about the psychology here. I'm just telling you what they tell me. We're still giving it to them at a sharply reduced price, and mostly in barter. I think we're selling it mostly for field corn."

"We're selling it to the Earth folks as a way to get our foot in the door," Coloma said.

Rigney rolled his hand toward Coloma. "Precisely," he said. "And so we come to you and your crew. It's perfectly reasonable that you would see a temporary assignment to a decommissioned ship as punishment for what happened at Danavar. But in fact, Captain Coloma, Commander Balla, what we're asking you to do is a task that's of great importance to the Colonial Union. Your job is to highlight the ship, to make the Earth people feel that it's going to be of benefit to them, answer all their questions and give them a positive experience with the Colonial Union. If you pull it off, you'll be doing the Colonial Union a service. A very significant service. One that means you'll be able to write your own ticket afterward."

"I have your word on that, Colonel?" Coloma asked.

"No," Rigney said. "But that's my point. Sell this ship and you won't need my word."

"Understood," Coloma said.

"Good," Rigney said. "Now. Tour the ship, check out the systems, tell me what you need, and you'll get it. But do it quickly. You have two weeks from today before the Earth delegation arrives to see what this ship can do. Be ready for them. Be ready for us."

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"Here's the problem," Marcos Basquez said, pointing to a series of tubes in the engine room of the ship. He was yelling over the din of his

crew banging away at updates and repairs.

"I see tubes, Marcos," Coloma said.

"You see power conduits," Basquez said.

"And?" Coloma said.

"We have two types of engines on a spaceship," Basquez said. "We got the conventional engines, which push us through normal space, and we got the skip drive, which punches holes in space-time. Both of them are powered from the same source, okay? These days, because we know what we're doing, we can seat the engines and the skip drive in the same place. Fifty years ago, when this pile of shit was put together, we had to separate the two." He pointed to the power conduits. "These are the conduits that send power to the skip drive from the engine."

"All right," Coloma said. "So what?"

"So they're degraded and need to be replaced," Basquez said.

"So replace them," Coloma said.

Basquez shook his head. "If it were that easy, I wouldn't be telling you about it. This engine design is half a century old. This ship was the last of its kind in service. There isn't another ship out there with this engine design. They haven't made replacement stock for this engine design in more than a decade."

"You can't replace the conduits because the replacement conduits don't exist," Coloma said.

"Right," Basquez said.

"Power conduits are still being made," Coloma said. "We had them all over the *Clarke*."

"Right, but they're not rated for this sort of power output," Basquez said. "Trying to use the current standard conduit here would be like stuffing a Great Dane into a Chihuahua sweater."

Coloma had to stop for a moment to take in the visual Basquez just offered. Then she said, "Would these conduits last through our mission? We're only skipping to the Rus system and back."

"There's two ways of answering that," Basquez said. "The first one is to say that these conduits *probably* won't overload and rupture, or

destroy this section of the ship, or rupture the hull, or kill everyone on board, including those important Earth visitors. The second one is that if you decide not to replace them, I hope you don't mind if I do my work remotely, like from Phoenix Station."

"What do you suggest?" Coloma asked.

"How much time do we have before we have to be under way?" Basquez asked.

"Twelve days," Coloma said.

"We have two options," Basquez said. "We comb through CDF and civilian shipyards looking for this size of conduit and hope they're not as degraded as these are, or we commission some made from scratch from the shipyards, based on this specification, and hope they arrive in time."

"Do both," Coloma said.

"Belt and suspenders, very wise," said Basquez. "This is the part where you send a note to that Rigney guy telling him to yell at people to get those parts here on time, right? I want a couple of days with them to make sure they have the capacity we'll need."

"I'll do it on my way to my next meeting," Coloma said.

"This is why I like working with you, Captain," Basquez said, and then turned his attention to one of his engineers, who evidently needed yelling at.

Rigney promised to get the conduit specialists at the CDF shipyards on Phoenix Station on the job and told Coloma to have Basquez send the specs to him directly. Coloma smiled as she disconnected from her talk with Rigney. Civilian captains and ships were almost always prioritized below Colonial Defense Forces ships when it came time to allot materials and expertise; it was nice to be at the front of the line for once.

Coloma's next meeting, in one of the ship's tiny conference rooms, was with Lieutenant Harry Wilson.

"Captain," Wilson said as she approached him. He saluted.

“Why do you do that?” Coloma asked him. She sat down at the conference room table.

“Ma’am?” Wilson said, lowering his arm.

“Why do you salute me?” Coloma asked. “You’re Colonial Defense Forces and I am not. You’re not required to salute civilian captains.”

“You still outrank me,” Wilson said.

“That’s not what you told me at Danavar, when you flashed your security clearance at me and ordered me to give you my shuttle,” Coloma said. “Which you then destroyed.”

“Sorry about that, ma’am,” Wilson said. “It was necessary at the time.”

“You still have that security clearance?” Coloma asked.

“I do,” Wilson said. “I think they forgot they gave it to me. I’m pretty harmless with it. I use it mostly to check box scores for baseball games back on Earth.”

“I understand you’ve just returned from being a hostage,” Coloma said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Wilson said. “An unfortunate incident with the Bula. We ended up with six of their ships planning to blow us out of the sky. Ambassador Abumwe was part of the diplomatic team that got us released. They’re still ironing out the details of the ransom, I believe. Letting us go early was a sign of good faith. They have other things to hold over us.”

“You certainly find yourself in the middle of a number of interesting incidents,” Coloma said.

“I wouldn’t mind not having that talent,” Wilson said.

“I have a job for you,” Coloma said. “I’m prepping this ship to display and then sell to a group of representatives from Earth. I need someone to be their guide and liaison while they are here on the ship. I want you to do it.”

“Seems to me you have an entire diplomatic corps you can call on to do that job,” Wilson said. “I’m a CDF tech specialist.”

"You're from Earth," Coloma said. "All the diplomats I could use are from the Colonial Union. My job is to make these people comfortable with the ship and with us. I think it would be useful to have someone here who speaks their language."

"I might not speak their language," Wilson said. "There are a couple hundred of them in service on Earth."

"It's an expression," Coloma said, testily, and pulled out her PDA. "I meant someone who has a shared history with them and who can cogently describe the advantages of the Colonial Union to them. Your technical background will come in handy because that means you can explain details of the ship to them, which no normal diplomat could do. Also, the files I have on these representatives say that they are all from either the United States or Canada. I think you will be able to speak their language just fine." She played her fingers across the PDA. "There. I've sent you their information."

"Thank you," Wilson said. "If you want me, I'm happy to serve in this role for you. I'm just surprised you want me. I was pretty sure I was on your shit list, Captain."

"You were," Coloma said. "You are. But help me with this and you'll get off of it."

"Yes, ma'am," Wilson said.

"Good. Then we're done here," Coloma said. "You're dismissed."

"Of course," Wilson said, and then saluted Coloma again.

"I already told you that wasn't necessary," Coloma said to Wilson.

"You put your ship in the path of a missile meant to kill members of an alien race, and kept the Colonial Union from having to fight a fight we'd have lost," Wilson said. "That deserves a salute, ma'am."

Coloma returned the salute. Wilson left.

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Basquez got his conduits a day before departure and was not in the least happy about it. "We've barely got time to install them, much less test them," Basquez said, through the PDA. "And I haven't had time to

update the engineering systems down here. We're still working off of fifty-year-old stations. You need to ask your Rigney for a delay."

"I already did and he already said no," Coloma said. She was in the shuttle bay's control room with Balla and Wilson, waiting for the arrival of the Earth diplomats. "They've got these people on a tight schedule."

"His precious schedule will be disrupted if we blow the hell up," Basquez said.

"Is that really going to be a problem?" Coloma said.

There was a pause on the other end of the PDA. "No," Basquez admitted. "I did a preliminary test of their throughput when I unpacked them. They should hold up."

"It will take us three days to get to skip distance," Coloma said. "That should be more than enough time to do your tests."

"It would be better to do the tests here in the dock," Basquez said.

"I'm not disagreeing with you, Marcos," Coloma said. "But it's not up to us."

"Right," Basquez said. "I'll have these bastards installed in about six hours, and I'll run a few more tests off the engineering stations. If I can, I'll update the stations with new software tomorrow. It might give us more accurate readings."

"Fine," Coloma said. "Let me know." She ended the discussion.

"Problems?" Balla asked her.

"Other than Basquez being paranoid, no," Coloma said.

"It's not a bad thing for an engineer to be paranoid," Balla said.

"I prefer them that way," Coloma said. "Just not when I'm busy with other things."

"The shuttle is twenty klicks out and slowing," Wilson said. "I'm going to purge atmosphere and open the doors."

"Do it," Coloma said. Wilson nodded and communicated directly with the shuttle bay systems with the BrainPal computer in his head. There was a chugging sound as the bay reclaimers sucked in the air and

stored it for rerelease. When the bay was sufficiently airless, Wilson cracked up the bay doors. The shuttle hovered silently outside.

"Here come the Earthlings," Wilson said.

The shuttle landed. Wilson closed the doors and reintroduced the atmosphere; when it was back, the three of them filed out to wait for the shuttle door to open and disgorge its passengers.

To Coloma's eye they did not seem especially impressive: three men and two women, all middle-aged and homogeneous in appearance and attitude. She introduced herself, Balla and Wilson; the leader of the Earth contingent introduced himself as Marlon Tiege and likewise announced his team, fumbling over the names of two of them. "Sorry," he said. "We've had a long journey."

"Of course," Coloma said. "Lieutenant Wilson will be your liaison while you are here; he'll be more than happy to show you your quarters. We're on standard universal time on this ship, and we're scheduled to depart from Phoenix Station at 0530 tomorrow morning; until then, please rest and relax. If you need anything, Wilson will make it happen."

"I am at your service," Wilson said, and then smiled. "My files tell me you're from Chicago, Mr. Tiege."

"That's right," Tiege said.

"Cubs or White Sox?" Wilson asked.

"You have to ask?" Tiege said. "Cubs."

"Then I feel honor-bound to inform you I'm a Cards fan," Wilson said. "I hope that won't cause a diplomatic incident."

Tiege smiled. "I think in this one case I'll be willing to let it pass."

"We're talking baseball," Wilson said to Coloma, noting her look, which was positioned between puzzlement and irritation. "It's a popular team sport in the United States. His favorite team and my favorite team are in the same division, which means they are rivals and frequently play against each other."

"Ah," Coloma said.

"They don't have baseball up here?" Tiege asked Wilson.

"Mostly not," Wilson said. "Colonists are from different parts of the world. The closest most colonies come is cricket."

"That's crazy talk," Tiege said.

"Tell me about it," Wilson said, and then motioned with his hand, leading the Earth mission from the shuttle bay while Tiege nattered on about the Cubs.

"What just happened?" Coloma asked Balla, after a minute.

"You said you wanted someone who would speak their language," Balla reminded her.

"I expected to be able to speak their language a little," Coloma said.

"Better learn more about baby bears," suggested Balla.

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The first day of the trip consisted of Wilson giving the visitors a tour of the ship. Coloma wasn't thrilled when the contingent from Earth showed up on her bridge, but the entire point of the trip was to sell them on the ship, so she did her best impression of a polite, engaged captain who had nothing better to do than answer inane questions about her ship. While she was doing this, she would occasionally glance over at Wilson, who seemed preoccupied.

"What is it?" Coloma asked him, when Balla had led the Earth contingent over to the life support and energy management displays.

"What is what?" Wilson said.

"Something is bothering you," Coloma said.

"It's nothing," Wilson said. Then, "I'll tell you about it later, ma'am."

Coloma considered pressing him on the subject, but then Tiege and his cohort returned to Wilson, who took them elsewhere. Coloma made a note to follow up with Wilson and then got lost in the day-to-day management of the ship.

It was as Rigney had advertised to her: old but serviceable. Its systems ran well, with the occasional bump occasioned by the fact that she and every other crew member had to learn archaic systems. Some of

the systems, like those in the engine room, had never been updated because the systems they were tied to had never been updated, either. Other systems were revamped when the ship made the transition from military to civilian use, and others—like the weapons systems—were removed almost entirely. Regardless, none of the systems were newer than fifteen years old, a period of time two years longer than Coloma herself had been in the Department of State's fleet service. Fortunately, neither the CDF nor the Department of State was the sort of organization to radically change the interface of its command systems. Even engineering's fifty-year-old consoles were simple enough to navigate through once you made a few concessions to antiquity.

It's not a bad ship, Coloma said to herself. The people of Earth weren't getting something new, but they weren't getting a lemon, either. She'd hesitate to go so far as to call it a classic, however.

Sometime later, Coloma's PDA pinged; it was Basquez. "I think we may have a problem," he said.

"What kind of problem?" Coloma asked.

"The sort where I think you might want to come down and have me explain it to you in person," Basquez said.

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"I tried updating the engineering software on the consoles, but that didn't work because the consoles are fifty years old and the hardware can't keep up with the new software," Basquez said, handing his PDA to Coloma. "So I went in the opposite direction. I took the software from the consoles, ported it into my PDA and created a virtual environment to run it. Then I updated it inside that environment to boost its sensitivity. And that's where I saw this." He pointed to a section of the PDA, which was displaying a picture of what looked like a glowing tube.

Coloma squinted. "Saw what?" she asked. "What am I looking at?"

"You're looking at the energy flow through a section of the conduit we just installed," Basquez said. "And this"—he pointed again at a

section of the PDA, tapping it for emphasis—"is a kink in the flow."

"What does that mean?" Coloma said.

"Right now it doesn't mean anything," Basquez said. "We're only passing ten percent of capacity through the conduit to prep and test the skip drive. It's a disruption of maybe one ten-thousandth of the total flow. Small enough that if I hadn't updated the software, I would have missed it. The thing is, there's a reason we keep power flows as smooth as possible—disruptions introduce chaos, and chaos can mean ruptures. If we push more capacity through the conduit, there's no guarantee that the disruption won't scale at a geometric or logarithmic rate, and then —"

"And then we would have a rupture and then we'd be screwed," Coloma said.

"It's a very small risk, but you're the one the Colonial Union is telling to make this thing go off without a hitch," Basquez said. "So this is a hitch. A potential hitch."

"What do you want to do about it?" Coloma said.

"I want to take down that chunk of tube and run some scanners through it," Basquez said. "Find out what's causing the problem. If it's an imperfection in the physical conduit or the sheathing inside, that's something we can fix here. If it's something else … well, I have no clue what else it could be except a physical imperfection, but if it's something else, we should figure out what it is and what we can do about it."

"Does this set us back on our itinerary?" Coloma asked.

"It might, but it shouldn't," Basquez said. "I'm about 99.99 percent sure it's something we can deal with here. My people will need about ninety minutes to take down that section, another sixty to scan it the way it should be scanned, about ten minutes to buff out any imperfections we find, and another ninety minutes to reinstall the section and run some tests. If everything checks out, we can push more power through on schedule. You won't miss your skip."

"Then stop talking to me about it and do it," Coloma said.

"Yes, ma'am," Basquez said. "I'll let you know when everything's cleaned up."

"Good," Coloma said. She turned away from Basquez and saw Wilson walking up to her. "You've lost your flock," she said to him.

"I didn't lose them, I parked them in the officers lounge to watch a video," he said. "Then I went to the bridge to find you, and Balla said you were here."

"What is it?" Coloma said.

"It's our Earthlings," Wilson said. "I'm pretty sure they're not actually from Earth. Not recently, anyway."

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"You're basing your suspicions on a baseball team?" Neva Balla asked, disbelievingly. Coloma had her report to the conference room she and Wilson were in and had Wilson repeat what he had said to her.

"It's not just any baseball team, it's the *Cubs,*" Wilson said, and then held out his hands in a helpless sort of gesture. "Listen, you have to understand something. In all of the history of professional sports, the Cubs are the ultimate symbol of complete failure. The championship of baseball is something called the World Series, and it's been so long since the Cubs have won it that no one who is alive could remember the last time they won it. It's so long that no one alive knew anyone who was alive when they won it. We're talking *centuries* of abject failure here."

"So what?" Balla said.

"So the Cubs won the World Series two years ago," Wilson said. He nodded to Coloma. "I made a joke to Captain Coloma here that I've been using that security clearance I have to check baseball box scores. Well, it's not a lie, I do. I like having that connection back home. Yesterday when Tiege mentioned being a Cubs fan, I sent in a request for the Cubs' season stats going back to when I left Earth. As a Cards fan, I wanted to rub his face in his team's continued failure. But then I found out the Cubs had broken their streak."

Balla looked at Wilson blankly.

"Two years ago the Cubs won a hundred and one games," Wilson continued. "That's the most games they've won in over a century. They only lost a single game in their entire playoff run, and swept the Cards —my team—in their divisional series. In game four of the World Series, some kid named Jorge Alamazar pitched the first perfect game in a World Series since the twentieth century."

Balla looked over to her captain. "This isn't my sport," she said. "I don't know what any of this means."

"It means," Wilson said, "that there's no possible way a Cubs fan who has been on Earth anytime in the last two years would fail to tell any baseball fan that the Cubs won the Series. And when I identified myself as a Cards fan, Tiege's first reaction should have been to rub the Cubbies' victory in my face. It's simply impossible."

"Maybe he's not that big of a fan," Balla said.

"If he's from Chicago, it's not something he would miss," Wilson said. "And we talked enough about baseball last night that I'm pretty confident he's not just a casual viewer of the sport. But I grant you could be right, and he's either not enough of a fan or too polite to mention the Cubs ending a centuries-long drought. So I checked."

"How did you do that?" Balla asked.

"I talked about the Cubs being the ultimate symbol of professional sports futility," Wilson said. "I needled Tiege about it for about ten full minutes. He took it and admitted it was true. He doesn't know the Cubs won the Series. He doesn't know because the Colonial Union is still enforcing a news blackout from the Earth. He doesn't know because either he's a colonist bred and born or is former Colonial Defense Forces who retired and colonized."

"What about the other people on his team?" Balla asked.

"I talked to them all and casually dropped questions about life on Earth," Wilson said. "They're all very nice people, just like Tiege is, but if any of them know anything about Earth anytime since about a decade ago, it got past me. None of them seemed to be able to name things that anyone from the United States or Canada should know, like

names of sitting presidents or prime ministers, popular music or entertainment figures, or anything about big stories of the last year. A hurricane hit South Carolina last year and flattened most of Charleston. One of the women, Kelle Laflin, says she's from Charleston but seems completely oblivious that the hurricane happened."

"Then what's going on?" Balla said.

"We're asking the same question," Coloma said. "We have a team from Earth here to buy this ship from the Colonial Union. But if they're not from Earth, where are they from? And what do they intend with the ship?"

Balla turned to Wilson. "You shouldn't have left them alone," she said.

"I have a crew member watching the door," Wilson said. "They'll let me know if one or more of them try to slip away. I'm also tracking their PDAs, which so far, at least, they don't seem to separate themselves from. So far none of them show the slightest inclination to sneak off."

"What we're trying to decide now is what Colonel Rigney knows about this," Coloma said. "He's the one we've been dealing with for this mission. It seems impossible to me he's not behind this charade."

"Don't be too sure," Wilson said. "The Colonial Defense Forces have a long history of inborn sneakiness. It's one of the things that got us in trouble with the Earth in the first place. It's entirely possible someone above Rigney is pulling a fast one on him, too."

"But it still doesn't make any sense," Balla said. "No matter who has dropped fake Earth diplomats here, we're still not going to be selling this ship to anyone on Earth. This charade doesn't add up."

"There's something we're not getting," Wilson said. "We might not have all the information we need."

"Tell me where we can get more information," Coloma said. "I'm open to suggestion."

Coloma's PDA pinged. It was Basquez. "We have a problem," he said.

"Is this another 'I think we have a potential energy flow' kind of problem?" Coloma asked.

"No, this is a 'Holy shit, we're all definitely going to die a horrible death in the cold endless dark of space' kind of problem," Basquez said.

"We'll be right down," Coloma said.

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"Well, this *is* interesting," Wilson said, looking at the pinprick-sized object at the end of his finger. He, Coloma, Balla and Basquez were in engineering, beside a chunk of conduit and a brace of instruments Basquez used to examine the conduit. Basquez had shooed away the rest of his crew, who were now hovering some distance away, trying to listen in.

"It's a bomb, isn't it," Basquez said.

"Yeah, I think it is," Wilson said.

"What sort of damage could a bomb that size do?" Coloma said. "I can barely even see it."

"If there's antimatter inside, it could do quite a lot," Wilson said. "You don't need a lot of that stuff to make a big mess."

Coloma peered at the tiny thing again. "If it was antimatter, it would have annihilated itself already."

"Not necessarily," Wilson said, still gazing at the pinprick. "When I was working at CDF Research and Development, there was a team working on pellet shot–sized antimatter containment units. You generate a suspending energy field and wrap it in a compound that acts like a battery and powers the energy field inside. When the power runs out, the energy field collapses and the antimatter connects with the wrapping. Kablam."

"They got it to work?" Basquez asked.

"When I was there? No," Wilson said, glancing over to Basquez. "But they were some very clever kids. And we were decoding some of the latest technology we'd stolen from the Consu, who are at least a couple millennia ahead of us in these things. And I was there a couple

of years ago." His gaze went back to the pinprick. "So they could have had time to perfect this little baby, sure."

"You couldn't take down the whole ship with that," Balla said. "Antimatter or not."

Wilson opened his mouth, but Basquez got there first. "You wouldn't need to," he said. "All you have to do is rupture the conduit and the energy inside would take it from there. Hell, you wouldn't even need to rupture it. If this tore up the inside of the conduit enough, the disruption of the energy flow would be all you need to make it burst apart."

"And that has the added advantage of making it look like an explosion based on material failure rather than an actual bombing," Wilson said.

"Yeah," Basquez said. "If the black box survived, it would only show the rupture, not the bomb going off."

"Time this thing so it goes off right before a skip, when you're feeding energy to the skip drive," Wilson said. "No one would be the wiser."

"Rigney said we needed to keep to a schedule," Basquez said, to Coloma.

"Wait, you don't think *we* planted this bomb, do you?" Balla asked.

Coloma, Wilson and Basquez were silent.

"That doesn't make any sense," Balla said, forcefully. "It makes no sense at all for the Colonial Union to blow up its own ship."

"It doesn't make sense for the Colonial Union to put fake Earthlings on the ship, either," Wilson pointed out. "And yet here they are."

"Wait, what?" Basquez said. "Those diplomats aren't from Earth? What the hell?"

"Later, Marcos," Coloma said. Basquez lapsed into silence, glowering at this latest twist of events. Coloma turned to Wilson. "I am open to suggestions, Lieutenant."

"I have no answers to give you," Wilson said. "I don't think any of us have any answers at this point. So I would suggest we try finding alternate means of acquiring answers."

Coloma thought about this for a moment. Then she said, "I know how we can do that."

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"Everything's ready," Coloma said, to Wilson, via her PDA. Her words were being ported into his BrainPal so he'd be the only one to hear them. Wilson, on the floor of the shuttle bay with the fake Earthlings, glanced over to the shuttle bay control room and gave her a very brief nod. Then he turned his attention to the Earthlings.

"We've already seen the shuttle bay, you know, Harry," Marlon Tiege said to Wilson. "Twice, now."

"I'm about to show it to you in a whole new way, Marlon, I promise," Wilson said.

"Sounds exciting," Tiege said, smiling.

"Just you *wait,*" Wilson said. "But first, a question for you."

"Shoot," Tiege said.

"You know by now that I enjoy giving you shit about the Cubs," Wilson said.

"They would kick you out of the Cards fan club if you didn't," Tiege said.

"Yes, they would," Wilson said. "I'm wondering what you would ever do if the Cubbies actually ever took the Series."

"You mean, before or after my heart attack?" Tiege said. "I would probably kiss every woman I saw. And most of the men, too."

"The Cubs won the Series two years ago, Marlon," Wilson said.

"What?" Tiege said.

"Swept the Yankees in four. Final game of the Series, the Cubs hurler pitched a perfect game. Cubs won a hundred and one games on the way to the playoffs. The Cubbies are world champions, Marlon. Just thought you should know."

Coloma watched Marlon Tiege's face and noted that the man's physiognomy was not well suited to showing two emotions at once: utter joy at the news about the Cubs and complete dismay that he'd been caught in a lie. She couldn't say, however, that she was not enjoying the spectacle of the man's face trying to contain both at the same time.

"Where are you from, Marlon?" Wilson asked.

"I'm from Chicago," Tiege said, regaining his composure.

"Where are you from most recently?" Wilson asked.

"Harry, come on," Tiege said. "This is crazy."

Wilson ignored him and turned to one of the women, Kelle Laflin. "Last year a hurricane smacked straight into Charleston," he said, and watched her go pale. "You must remember."

She nodded mutely.

"Great," Wilson said. "What was the name they gave the hurricane?"

Coloma noted that Laflin's face was already primed for dismay.

Wilson turned back to Tiege. "Here's the deal, Marlon." He pointed over to the control room. Tiege followed the vector of the point to see Captain Coloma sitting there, behind a console. "When I give the captain the signal, she's going to start pumping air out of this shuttle bay. It'll take a minute for that cycle to happen. Now, don't worry about me, I'm Colonial Defense Forces, which means that I can hold my breath for a good ten minutes if I have to, and I also have my combat uniform on under my clothes at the moment. So I'll be fine. You and your friends, however, will likely die quite painfully as your lungs collapse and vomit blood into the vacuum."

"You can't do that," Tiege said. "We're a diplomatic mission."

"Yes, but from whom?" Wilson said. "Because you're not from Earth, Marlon."

"Are you sure about that?" Tiege said. "Because if you're wrong, think about what will happen when the Earth finds out you've killed us."

"Yes, well," Wilson said, and fished out a small plastic case that contained the pinprick bomb in it, resting on a ball of cotton. "You would have been dead anyway after this bomb went off, and we along with you. This way, the rest of us still get to live. Last chance, Marlon."

"Harry, I can't—," Tiege began, and Wilson held up his hand.

"Have it your way," he said, and nodded to Coloma. She started the purge cycle. The shuttle bay was filled with the sound of air being sucked into reservoirs.

"Wait!" Tiege said. Wilson motioned to Coloma with their agreed-upon signal and sent a "stop" message to her PDA via his BrainPal. Coloma aborted the purge cycle and waited.

Marlon Tiege stood there for a moment, sweating. Then he cracked a rueful smile and turned to Wilson.

"I'm from Chicago, and these days I live on Erie. I'm going to tell you everything I know about this mission and you have my word on that," he said, to Wilson. "But you have to tell me one thing first, Harry."

"What is it?" Wilson asked.

"That you weren't just fucking with me about the Cubs," Tiege said.

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"You want explanations," Colonel Abel Rigney said to Coloma from behind his desk at Phoenix Station. In a chair in front of the desk, Colonel Liz Egan sat, watching Coloma.

"What I want is to walk you out of an airlock," Coloma said, to Rigney. She glanced over to Egan in her chair. "And possibly walk you out after him." She returned her gaze to Rigney. "But for now, an explanation will do."

Rigney smiled slightly at this. "You remember Danavar, of course," he said. "A CDF frigate named the *Polk* destroyed, the Utche ship targeted and your own ship mortally wounded."

"Yes," Coloma said.

"And you know about the recent incident with the Bula," Egan said. "A human wildcat colony on one of their worlds was attacked, and it was discovered that three modified, undercover CDF members were among them. When we tried to retrieve what was left of the colony, the Bula surrounded the ship and we had to ransom it and its crew back from them."

"I knew about some of that from Wilson and Ambassador Abumwe's people," Coloma said.

"I'm sure you did," Rigney said. "Our problem is that we suspect whoever ambushed the *Polk* and your ship at Danavar got information about the *Polk*'s mission from us. Same with that wildcat colony in Bula territory."

"Got the information from the CDF?" Coloma asked.

"Or from the Department of State," Egan said. "Or both."

"You have a spy," Coloma said.

"Spies, more likely," Egan said. "Both of those missions are a lot of ground to cover for one person."

"We needed a way to pinpoint where the leak was coming from, and how much they knew. So we decided to go fishing," Rigney said. "We had a decommissioned spacecraft, and after your actions with the *Clarke,* we had a spacecraft crew without a ship. It seemed like an opportune time to cast out a line and see what we came up with."

"What you came up with was a bomb that would have destroyed my ship and killed everyone on it, including your fake Earth mission," Coloma said.

"Yes," Egan said. "And look what we discovered. We discovered that whoever tried to sabotage you has access to confidential Colonial Defense Forces research. We discovered whoever it was has the ability to access communications through Colonial Defense Forces channels. We discovered they have access to CDF shipyards and fabrication sites. We have a wealth of information that we can sift through to narrow down the person or persons selling us out, and to stop it from happening again. To stop anyone else from dying."

"A fine sentiment," Coloma said. "It glosses over the part where I and my crew and your people all die."

"It was a risk we had to take," Rigney said. "We couldn't tell you because we didn't know where the leaks were coming from. We didn't tell *our* people, either. They're all retired CDF and people who occasionally do work for us when someone being green would be overly conspicuous. They know there's a chance of death involved."

"We didn't," Coloma said.

"We needed to know if someone was going to try to sabotage that mission," Rigney said. "Now we know and now we know more than we ever have before about how these people work. I won't apologize for the actions we took, Captain. I can say I regret that the actions were necessary. And I can say that I'm very glad you didn't die."

Coloma stewed on this for a moment. "What happens now?" she asked, finally.

"What do you mean?" Egan asked.

"I have no command," Coloma said. "I have no ship. I and my crew are in limbo." She motioned at Egan. "I don't know what your final inquiry has decided about my future." She looked back at Rigney. "You told me that if I completed this mission successfully, I could write my own ticket. I can't tell if this was a successful mission, or even if it was, whether your promise is any more true than anything else you've said to me."

Rigney and Egan looked at each other; Egan nodded. "From our point of view, Captain Coloma, it was a successful mission," Rigney said.

"As for the final inquiry, it's been decided that your actions at Danavar were consistent with the best traditions of command and of diplomacy," Egan said. "You've been awarded a commendation, which has already been placed in your file. Congratulations."

"Thank you," Coloma said, a little numbly.

"As for your ship," Rigney said. "It seems to me you have one. It's a little old, and being stationed on it has been seen as a hardship post.

But on the other hand, a hardship posting is better than no posting at all."

"Your crew is already used to the ship by now," Egan said. "And we do need another diplomatic ship in the fleet. Ambassador Abumwe and her staff have a list of assignments and no way to get to them. If you want the ship, it's yours. If you don't want the ship, it's still yours. Congratulations."

"Thank you," Coloma said again, this time completely numbly.

"You're welcome," Egan said. "And you're dismissed, Captain."

"Yes, ma'am," Coloma said.

"And, Captain Coloma," Rigney said.

"Yes, sir," Coloma said.

"Give her a good name." He turned back to Egan, and the two of them fell into a conversation. Coloma walked herself out of the door.

Balla and Wilson were waiting for her outside Rigney's office. "Well?" Balla said.

"I've gotten a commendation," Coloma said. "I've been given a ship. The crew stays together. Abumwe's team is back on board."

"Which ship are we getting?" Wilson asked.

"The one we've been on," Coloma said.

"*That* old hunk of junk," Wilson said.

"Watch it, Lieutenant," Coloma said. "That's my ship. And she has a name. She's the *Clarke*."

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EPISODE SIX

The Back Channel

"General, let us return to the matter of humans," Unli Hado said.

From her seat on the podium behind General Tarsem Gau, leader of the Conclave, Hafte Sorvalh sighed as quietly as possible. When the Conclave was formalized and the Grand Assembly was created, with representatives from every member of the Conclave crafting the laws and traditions of the newly-emerging political entity comprising more than four hundred separate races, General Gau promised that every Sur—every forty standard days—he and those who followed him as executive would stand in the well of the assembly and answer questions from the representatives. It was his way of assuring the Conclave members that the leadership could always be held accountable.

Hafte Sorvalh told him at the time that as his trusted advisor, she thought it would be a way for the grasping, ambitious members of the assembly to grandstand and otherwise in all senses be a waste of his time. General Gau had thanked for her candor in this as in all other things and then went ahead and did it anyway.

Sorvalh had come to believe this was why, at these question-and-answer sessions, he always had her sit behind him. That way, he would not have to see the *I told you so* expression on her face. She had one of those now, listening to the tiresome Hado, from Elpri, pester Gau yet again about the humans.

"Return to the matter, Representative Hado?" Gau said, lightly. "It seems from these sessions that you never leave the matter alone." This received various sounds of amusement from the seated representatives,

but Sorvalh marked faces and expressions in the crowd that held no levity in them. Hado was a pest and held a minority view, but it was not to say the minority he was part of was entirely insignificant.

Standing at his bench assignment, Hado moved his face into what Sorvalh knew was a configuration expressing displeasure. "You jest, General," he said.

"I do not jest, Representative Hado," Gau said, equally lightly. "I am merely well aware of your concern for this particular race."

"If you are well aware of it, then perhaps you can tell me—tell the assembly—what plans you have to contain them," Hado said.

"Which 'them'?" Gau said. "You are aware, Representative, that the human race is currently divided into two camps—the Colonial Union and the Earth. The Earth is not a threat to us in any way. It has no ships and no way into space other than what the Colonial Union, from which it is now estranged, allows it. The Colonial Union relied on Earth for soldiers and colonists. Now that supply has been cut off. The Colonial Union knows that what soldiers and colonists it now loses, it cannot replace. This makes it cautious and conservative in its expenditures of both. Indeed, it has been said to me that the Colonial Union is now actually attempting diplomacy on a regular basis!" This received more sounds of amusement. "If the humans are actually attempting to get along with other races, my dear representative, it is an indication of just how cautious they are at this point."

"You believe, General, that because they play at diplomacy that they are no longer a threat," Hado said.

"Not at all," Gau said. "I believe that because they cannot threaten as they have, they now attempt diplomacy."

"The distinction between the two escapes me, General," Hado said.

"I am well aware of that fact, Representative Hado," Gau said. "Nevertheless, the distinction exists. Moreover, the main portion of the Colonial Union's attention at the moment is in a rapprochement with Earth. Since you ask what I plan to do to contain the humans, I will note to you what you should already know, which is that since the

Conclave trade fleet carrying Major John Perry appeared over Earth, we have maintained an active diplomatic presence on Earth. We have envoys in five of their major national capitals, and we have made the governments and people of Earth aware that should they choose not to reconcile with the Colonial Union, there is always the option of the Earth joining the Conclave."

This caused a stir among the assembly, and not without reason. The Colonial Union had destroyed the Conclave war fleet over Roanoke Colony, a fleet comprising a ship from each member race of the union. There was not a member race in the Conclave that had not suffered a wound from the humans, or that was not aware how perilously close the Conclave came to collapse in the immediate aftermath of that particular fiasco.

Representative Hado seemed especially incensed. "You would allow into the Conclave the same race who tried to destroy it," he said.

Gau did not answer the question directly. Instead he turned and addressed another representative. "Representative Plora," he said. "Would you please stand."

Representative Plora, an Owspa, shambled up on its spindly legs.

"If memory serves, Representative Hado, in the not-too-distant past, the Elpri and the Owspa shed a significant amount of their blood and treasure trying to eradicate each other from space and history," Gau said. "How many millions of each of your citizens died because of the hatred between your races? And yet both of you are here in this august assembly, peaceable, as your worlds are now peaceable."

"We attacked each other, not the Conclave," Hado said.

"I believe the principle still applies," Gau said, with a tone that suggested he had a hard time believing Hado attempted to make that argument. "And in any event, it was the Colonial Union which attacked the Conclave, not the Earth. To blame the Earth, or the humans who live on it, for the actions of the Colonial Union is to misapprehend how the Earth itself has been used by it. And, to your point, Representative, the longer we may through diplomacy keep

Earth from allying itself with the Colonial Union—or joining the Colonial Union outright—the longer we keep the humans from doing any sort of mischief at our door. Is that not what you are asking for?"

Sorvalh watched Hado fidget. It wasn't at all what he was asking for, of course. What he wanted was the Conclave to expunge the human race from every crevice it clung to. But it looked for the moment as if Gau had walked him into a corner. Which, Sorvalh supposed, was one of the reasons he had these ridiculous question-and-answer sessions in the first place. He was very good at walking his opponents into corners.

"What about the disappearing ships?" came another voice, and everyone, including Sorvalh, turned toward Representative Plora, who had remained standing after it had been called on. Plora, suddenly aware that it was the focus of attention, shrank back but did not sit. "There have been reports of more than a dozen ships that have disappeared from systems where Conclave territory borders human territory. Is that not the work of the humans?"

"And if it is, why have we not responded to it?" Hado said, now out of his corner.

General Gau glanced back to Sorvalh at this point. She resisted giving him her *I told you so* expression.

"Yes, we have lost several ships in the last few Sur," General Gau said. "They have largely been merchant ships. These are systems where piracy is not entirely unknown, however. Before we leap to the assumption that humans are behind this, we should explore the more likely explanation that raiders—ostensibly citizens of the Conclave—are the cause."

"How can we know for sure?" Hado said. "Have you made it a priority to know, General? Or are you willing to underestimate the humans for a second time?"

This quieted the assembly. Gau had taken responsibility for the debacle at Roanoke and had never pretended other than that he was responsible. But only a fool would press him on the subject, and it appeared that Unli Hado was that fool.

"It is always a priority for our government to find those of our citizens who are lost to us," Gau said. "We will find them and we will find whoever is behind their disappearance—whoever they are. What we will *not* do, Representative Hado, is use the disappearances of these ships to launch into a fight with a people who have shown how committed they are to trying to destroy us when they feel they are cornered and have no choice left but to fight. You ask me whether I am willing to underestimate the humans. I assure you that I am not. What I am wondering, Representative, is why *you* seem so determined to do so."

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Sorvalh visited General Gau later in his personal office. It was cramped, even if one was not a Lalan, who were a tall species, and Hafte Sorvalh was tall for her species.

"It's all right," Gau said, from his desk, as she ducked through the door. "You can say it."

"Say what?" Sorvalh asked.

"Every time you crouch through the door of this office, you come in, you straighten up, and you look around," Gau said. "Every time you get an expression on your face that looks like you have bitten into something slightly unpleasant. So go ahead and say it: My office is cramped."

"I would say it is cozy," Sorvalh said.

Gau laughed in his fashion. "Of course you would," he said.

"It's been commented on by others how small this office is, considering your position," Sorvalh said.

"I have the large public office for meetings, and to impress people when I have to, of course," Gau said. "I'm not blind to the power of impressive spaces. But I've spent most of my life on starships, even after I began to build the Conclave. You get used to not a lot of space. I'm more comfortable here. And no one can say that I give more to

myself than to the representatives of any of our member races. And that, too, has its advantages."

"I see your point," Sorvalh said.

"Good," Gau said, and then motioned to the chair that he clearly had brought in for her, because it matched her physiology. "Please, sit."

Sorvalh sat and waited. Gau attempted to wait her out, but waiting out a Lalan is a bad bet on a good day. "All right, say the *other* thing you're thinking," Gau said.

"Unli Hado," Sorvalh said.

"One of the graspingly ambitious types that you warned me about," Gau said.

"He's not going to go away," Sorvalh said. "Nor is he entirely without allies."

"Very few," Gau said.

"But growing," Sorvalh said. "You have me with you for these sessions to count heads. I count heads. There are more of them each session who are either in his orbit or drifting toward him. You won't have to worry about him this time, or the next, or possibly for several sessions down the line. But if this goes on, in time you will have a faction on your hands, and that faction will be agitating for the eradication of the humans. All of them."

"One of the reasons we formed the Conclave was to rid ourselves of the idea that an entire people could or should be eradicated," Gau said.

"I am aware of that," Sorvalh said. "It was one of the reasons why my people gave you and the Conclave their allegiance. I am also aware that ideals are hard to practice, especially when they are new. And I am also aware that there's not a species in the Conclave who doesn't find the humans … well … *vexing* is likely the most polite word for it."

"They are that," Gau said.

"Do you really believe that they would be that hard to kill?" Sorvalh asked.

Gau presented an unusual face to Sorvalh. "An unusual and surprising question, coming from you of all people," he said.

"I don't wish them dead, personally," Sorvalh said. "At least, not actively. Nor would the Lalan government support a policy of extinction. But you suggested to Hado they would be a formidable opponent. I am curious if you believe it."

"Are the humans able to stand against us ship to ship, soldier to soldier? No, of course not," Gau said. "Even our defeat at Roanoke, with over four hundred ships destroyed, was not a material blow to our strength. It was one ship out of dozens or hundreds that each of our members had in their own fleets."

"So you don't believe it," Sorvalh said.

"That's not what I said," Gau said. "I said they can't stand against us ship to ship. But if the humans go to war with us, it won't be ship to ship. How many human ships went against us at Roanoke? None. And yet we were defeated—and the blow was immense. The Conclave almost fell, Hafte, not because our material strength had been compromised, but because our psychological strength had. Those ships were not what the humans were aiming for. Our unity was. The humans almost shattered us."

"And you believe they could do it again," Sorvalh said.

"If we pressed them? Why wouldn't they?" Gau said. "Throwing the Conclave nations back into war with each other is an optimum result for the humans. It would keep all of us occupied while they rebuild their strength and position. The real question is not whether the humans—the Colonial Union—could attack and possibly destroy the Conclave, if pressed. The real question is why they haven't tried to do it since Roanoke."

"As you say, they have been busy trying to bring the Earth back into the fold," Sorvalh said.

"Let us hope it takes them a long time," Gau said.

"Or perhaps they have started making war on the Conclave," Sorvalh suggested.

"You're talking about the missing ships," Gau said.

"I am," Sorvalh said. "As tiresome as Representative Hado may be, the disappearance of so many ships near human space is not to be dismissed out of hand."

"I don't dismiss it," Gau said. "The representative-major for the fleet has our investigators scouring the scenes and the nearby populated worlds for information. We have nothing so far."

"Ships rarely disappear so comprehensively," Sorvalh said. "If there's no trace, that in itself says something."

"What it doesn't say is who is responsible, however," Gau said, and then raised a hand as Sorvalh moved to comment. "It's not to say we don't have our intelligence net within the Colonial Union working overtime trying to find connections between the humans and the disappearances. We do. However, if we find it, we will deal with it discreetly, and without the sort of open warfare that Hado and his friends in the assembly so want us to have."

"Your desire for subtlety will frustrate them," Sorvalh said.

"I am fine with them being frustrated," Gau said. "It's a small price to pay for keeping the Conclave intact. However, it is not the discussion of the disappearing ships that is the reason I asked you here, Hafte."

"I am at your service, General," Sorvalh said.

Gau picked up a manuscript sheet on his desk and handed it to her.

She gave him a curious look as she took it. "A hard copy," she said. Her assignments from him were usually offered on her computer.

"It's not a copy," Gau said. "That sheet you have is the only place in the entire Conclave where that information is recorded."

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's a list of new human colonies," Gau said.

Sorvalh looked at Gau, genuinely shocked. The Conclave had forbidden any unaffiliated races from colonizing new planets. If they tried, the new colonies would be displaced, or destroyed if the colonists would not leave. "They can't truly be that stupid," she said.

"They are not," Gau said. "Or at least, officially, the Colonial Union is not." He pointed at the sheet. "These are what the humans call 'wildcat colonies.' It means that they are not sanctioned or supported by the Colonial Union. Most of these sorts of colonies are dead in a year."

"So nothing we could call out the Colonial Union for," Sorvalh said.

"No," Gau said. "Except for this: We have rumors that the Bula found humans attempting a wildcat colony on one of their worlds, and that at least a few of the colonists were Colonial Defense Forces members. The Colonial Union attempted to extract the colony and were discovered doing so by the Bula. It had to part with a substantial ransom to retrieve its citizens and buy the Bula's silence."

"These wildcat colonies aren't actually unofficial at all, then," Sorvalh said. "And we're back to the question of whether they are truly that stupid."

"It's a fine question, but one that is tangential to my real concern," Gau said.

Sorvalh waggled the sheet in her hand. "You're worried that Hado and his friends will find out about these."

"Precisely," Gau said, and pointed at the sheet again. "That's the only written-out list, and it's written out only once to avoid it slipping out easily into the universe. But I am not stupid, nor do I believe my intelligence gatherers talk only to me. Hado and his compatriots will find out. And if they find out and if these colonies really do have Colonial Defense Forces members within them, then we have no choice but to remove the colony. If the colony won't be moved, we'll have to destroy it."

"And if we destroy it, we'll be at war with the Colonial Union," Sorvalh said.

"Or something close enough to it," Gau said. "The humans know they are in a bad position, Hafte. They are dangerous animals on the best of days. Poking at them right now is going to go poorly for

everyone involved. I want this problem solved privately before it becomes a public problem."

Sorvalh smiled. "I imagine this is where I come in."

"I've opened up a back channel to the Colonial Union," Gau said.

"And how did you do that?" Sorvalh asked.

"Me to our envoy in Washington, D.C.," Gau said. "Him to John Perry. John Perry to a friend of his in the CDF Special Forces. And so on up the chain of command, and back down again."

Sorvalh gave a motion of assent. "And my job is to meet with the back channel."

"Yes," Gau said. "In this case it will be someone of lower rank than you—apologies for that, the humans are twitchy." Sorvalh offered up a hand expression signaling acceptance and lack of concern. "It's a Colonel Abel Rigney. He's not of especially high rank, but he is very well placed to get things done."

"You want me to show him this list and let him know we know about the CDF soldiers," Sorvalh said.

"What I want you to do is scare him," Gau said. "In your own special way."

"Why, General," Sorvalh said, and gave the appearance once more of being shocked. "I have no idea what you mean."

General Gau smiled at this.

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"Well, he was certainly a tall fellow, wasn't he?" Sorvalh said, looking up at the statue in the Lincoln Memorial.

"Tall for a human, yes," Colonel Rigney said. "And especially tall for his time. Abraham Lincoln was president of the United States well before humans made it out into the universe. Not everyone had good nutrition then. People tended to be shorter. So he would have stood out. Among your people, Councillor Sorvalh, he'd be considered something of a runt."

"Ah," Sorvalh said. "Well, we are generally considered tall for most intelligent races we know of. But surely there might be some humans as tall as a Lalan."

"We have basketball players," Rigney said. "They are very tall for humans. The tallest of them might be as tall as the shortest of you."

"Interesting," Sorvalh said, and kept looking at Lincoln.

"Is there someplace you would like to go to talk, Councillor?" Rigney asked, after allowing Sorvalh her moment of contemplation.

Sorvalh turned to the human and smiled at him. "I do apologize, Colonel. I realize you are indulging me by meeting me here at a tourist attraction."

"Not at all," Rigney said. "In fact, I'm glad you did. Before I left Earth I lived in this area. You're giving me an excuse to visit old haunts."

"How wonderful," Sorvalh said. "Have you seen any of your family and friends while you're here?"

Rigney shook his head. "My wife passed on before I left Earth, and we never had children," he said. "My friends would all be in their eighties or nineties now, which is old for humans, so they're mostly dead, and I don't think the ones that are living would be too pleased to see me bounding in, looking like I'm twenty-three years old."

"I can see how that might be a problem," Sorvalh said.

Rigney pointed at Lincoln. "He looks the same as when I left."

"I would hope so!" Sorvalh said. "Colonel, would you mind walking as we talk? I walked down the Mall before I got here and I passed someone selling something called 'churros.' I should like to experiment with human cuisine, I think."

"Oh, churros," Rigney said. "Good choice. By all means, Councillor."

They walked down the stairs of the Lincoln Monument and toward the Mall, Sorvalh walking slowly so as to keep Rigney from having to jog to keep up. Sorvalh noticed other humans looking curiously at her; aliens on Earth were still a rarity, but not so rare now in Washington,

D.C., that the people there would not attempt nonchalance. They stared equally at the green human next to her, she noted.

"Thank you for meeting me," Sorvalh said to Rigney.

"I was delighted to," Rigney said. "You gave me an excuse to visit Earth again. That's a rare thing for a CDF member."

"It's convenient how the Earth has become a neutral ground to both of our governments," Sorvalh said.

Rigney winced at this. "Yes, well," he said. "Officially I am not allowed to be pleased by that particular development."

"I understand entirely," Sorvalh said. "Now then, Colonel. To business." She reached into the folds of her gown and produced the manuscript and handed it to Rigney.

He took it and looked at it curiously. "I'm afraid I can't read this," he said, after a moment.

"Come now, Colonel," Sorvalh said. "I know perfectly well that you have one of those computers in your head, just like every other Colonial Defense Forces member. What is the ridiculous name you call them?"

"A BrainPal," Rigney said.

"Yes, that," Sorvalh said. "So I am confident that not only have you already recorded the entire content of that paper into the computer, it has also rendered you a translation."

"All right," Rigney said.

"We aren't going to get anywhere, Colonel, if you are going to insist on fighting me on even the simplest of things," Sorvalh said. "We would not have opened up this back channel if it were not absolutely necessary. Please do me the courtesy of presuming I am not on my first mission of diplomacy."

"My apologies, Councillor," Rigney said, and handed back the document. "I'm in the habit of not revealing everything. Let's just say my automatic reflexes kicked in."

"Very well," Sorvalh said, took the manuscript and then placed it back into the folds of her gown. "Now that you've undoubtedly had

time to scan the translation, you can tell me what was written on the document."

"It was a list of uninhabited planets," Rigney said.

"I question that modifier, Colonel," Sorvalh said.

"Officially speaking, I have no idea what you are talking about," Rigney said. "Unofficially, I would be very interested in knowing how you developed that list."

"I am afraid I must keep that a secret," Sorvalh said. "And not just because I was never told. But I assume now we can dispense with the polite fiction that there are not, in fact, ten human colonies where they should not be."

"Those aren't sanctioned colonies," Rigney said. "They're wildcats. We can't stop people from paying spaceship captains to take them to a planet and drop them there without our permission."

"You could, I am certain," Sorvalh said. "But that's not the issue at the moment."

"Does the Conclave blame the Colonial Union for the existence of these wildcat colonies?" Rigney asked.

"We question that they are wildcat colonies at all, Colonel," Sorvalh said. "As wildcat colonies typically do not have Colonial Defense Forces soldiers in their mix of colonists."

Rigney had nothing to say to this. Sorvalh waited a few moments to see if this would change, and then continued. "Colonel Rigney, surely you understand that if we had wanted to vaporize these colonies, we would have done it by now," she said.

"Actually, I don't understand," Rigney said. "Just as I don't understand what the gist of this conversation is."

"The gist, as you say, is that I have a personal message and a bargain for the Colonial Union from General Gau," Sorvalh said. "That is to say, it comes from General Gau in the capacity of his own person, and not General Gau, leader of the Conclave, a federation of four hundred races whose combined might could crush you like a troublesome pest."

Colonel Rigney's face showed a flicker of annoyance at this assessment of the Colonial Union, but he quickly let it go. "I'm ready to hear the message," he said.

"The message is simply that he knows that your 'wildcat' colonies are no such thing and that under different circumstances you would have received notice of this knowledge by having the fleet show up at their doorstep, followed by other reprisals designed to strongly dissuade you from further colonization attempts," Sorvalh said.

"With respect, Councillor," Rigney said, "the last time your fleet showed up at our doorstep, it didn't end well for your fleet."

"That was the second-to-last time," Sorvalh said. "The last time a fleet of ours showed up at your doorstep, you lost the Earth. Beyond that, I think you and I both know that you will not get a chance to repeat your exploits at Roanoke."

"So the general wishes to remind us that normally he'd vaporize these colonies," Rigney said.

"He wishes to remind you of it to make the point that at this time he has no interest in doing that," Sorvalh said.

"And why not?" Rigney asked.

"Because," Sorvalh said.

"Really?" Rigney said, stopping his walk. "'Because' is the reason?"

"The reason is not important," Sorvalh said. "Suffice to say the general doesn't want to have a fight over these colonies at the moment, and it's a good guess that you don't, either. But there are those in the Conclave who would be delighted to have a fight over them. That's something neither you nor the general wants, although almost certainly for different reasons. And while right now the only two people in the Conclave political caste who know of the existence of that list are the general and me, I have no doubt that you know enough about politics to know that secrets don't stay secret long. We have very little time before the content of that list makes its way into the hands of those in the Conclave who would be thrilled to take a torch to your colonies, and to the Colonial Union." Sorvalh started walking again.

After a moment, Rigney followed. "You say we have very little time," he said. "Define 'very little.'"

"You have until the next time General Gau is required to take questions from the Grand Assembly," Sorvalh said. "By that time, the warmongers of the assembly will almost certainly know of the existence of at least some of the colonies, and that CDF soldiers are at them. They will demand the Conclave take action, and the general will have no choice but to do so. That will happen in thirty of our standard days. That would be about thirty-six days on your Colonial Union calendar."

"So much for the message," Rigney said. "What's the bargain?"

"Also simple," Sorvalh said. "Make the colonies disappear and the Conclave won't attack."

"This is easier said than done," Rigney said.

"This is not our concern," Sorvalh said.

"Supposing that there were Colonial Defense Forces soldiers at these colonies," Rigney said, "wouldn't simply removing them be sufficient?"

Sorvalh looked at Rigney as if he were a slow child. Rigney understood enough of the look to put up his hands. "Sorry," he said. "Didn't think it through enough before it came out of my mouth."

"These colonies aren't supposed to exist," Sorvalh said. "We might have been willing to overlook them if they had genuinely been wildcat colonies, at least until they got too large to ignore. But these are known to have CDF soldiers in them. They will never not be targets for the Conclave. They have to be gone before we have to officially take notice of them. You know what the consequences are otherwise, for both of our governments."

Rigney was silent again for a moment. "No bullshit, Councillor?"

Sorvalh didn't know the word "bullshit" but guessed at the context. "No bullshit, Colonel," she said.

"Nine out of ten of those colonies won't be difficult to evacuate," Rigney said. "Their colonists are standard-issue disgruntled Colonial

Union citizens, who have vague ideas about freedom from the tyranny of their fellow man or what have you, or simply don't like other people enough to want to have the company of more than about two hundred other of their own kind. Six of these colonies are near starvation anyway and would probably be happy to escape. I would, in their shoes."

"But then there is this other colony," Sorvalh said.

"Yes, then there is this other colony," Rigney said. "Do your people have racists? People who believe they are inherently superior to all other types of intelligent people?"

"We have some," Sorvalh said. "They're generally agreed to be idiots."

"Right," Rigney said. "Well, this other colony is made up almost totally of racists. Not only against other intelligent races—I shudder to think what they would think of *you*—but also against other humans who don't share their same phenotype."

"They sound lovely," Sorvalh said.

"They're assholes," Rigney said. "However, they are also well-armed, well-organized, well-funded assholes, and this particular colony is thriving. They left because they didn't like being part of a mongrel Colonial Union, and they hate us enough that they would probably get off on the idea that by going down in flames, they would consign us to hell as well. Extracting them would be messy."

"Is this actually a problem for the CDF?" Sorvalh asked. "I don't wish to be unpleasantly blunt about this, but the CDF is not known for being an institution that cares deeply about those whom they crush."

"We're not," Rigney said. "And when it comes down to it, we'd get them out, because the alternative would be grim. But in addition to being well armed, well organized and well funded, they're well connected. Their leader is the son of someone high up in the CU government. They're estranged—she's mortified that her son turned out to be a racist shithead—but he's still her son."

"Understood," Sorvalh said.

"As I said, messy," Rigney said.

They had arrived at the churro stand. The churro vendor looked up at Sorvalh, amazed. Rigney ordered for them, and the two of them continued walking after they had received their pastries.

"These are lovely!" Sorvalh exclaimed, after the first bite.

"Glad you think so," Rigney said.

"Colonel Rigney, you're worried that the only way to get these racist, intractable, *asshole* colonists is through bloodshed," Sorvalh said, after she took another bite.

"Yes," Rigney said. "We'll do it to avoid a war, but we'd like a different option."

"Well," Sorvalh said, around her churro, "inasmuch as I am asking you to do this, it would be wrong of me not to offer a possible solution to you."

"I'm listening," Rigney said.

"Understand that what I am going to suggest will be one of those things that never happened," Sorvalh said.

"Since this conversation isn't happening either, this is fine," Rigney said.

"I will also have to ask you to do one other thing for me first," Sorvalh said.

"And what is that?" Rigney asked.

"Buy me another churro," Sorvalh said.

• • •

"Take another step, xig, and I'll blow your head off," said the colonist directly in front of Sorvalh. He was pointing a shotgun at her chest.

Sorvalh stopped walking and stood calmly at the frontier of the colony of Deliverance. She had been walking toward it for several minutes, having had her shuttle land at the far reach of a broad meadow on which the colony had situated itself. Her gown swished as she moved, and the necklace she wore featured audio and visual devices feeding back to her ship. She had walked slowly, in order to give the

colony enough time to muster a welcoming party, and for another purpose as well. Five heavily armed men stood in front of her now, weapons raised. Two more that she could see lay on colony roofs, zeroed into her position with long-range rifles. Sorvalh assumed there were more she couldn't see, but they didn't concern her at the moment. She would be aware of them soon enough.

"Good morning, gentlemen," she said. She gestured to the markings on their skin. "Those are lovely. Very angular."

"Shut up, xig," said the colonist. "Shut up and turn around and get back in that shuttle of yours and fly off like a good bug."

"My name is Hafte Sorvalh," she said, pleasantly. "It's not 'Xig.'"

"A xig is what you are," said the colonist. "And I don't give a shit what you call yourself. You're leaving."

"Well," Sorvalh said, impressed. "Aren't you *fierce*."

"Fuck you, xig," the colonist said.

"A bit repetitive, however," Sorvalh said.

The colonist raised the shotgun so that it was now pointing at her head. "You'll be going now," he said.

"I won't, actually," Sorvalh said. "And if you or any other member of your merry band tries to shoot me, you'll be dead before you can manage to pull the trigger. You see, my friend, while I was walking toward your compound, my starship orbiting above this location was busy tracking and marking the heat signatures of every living thing in your colony larger than ten of your kilos. You're now all entered into the ship's weapons database, and about a dozen particle weapons are actively tracking twenty or thirty targets each. If any one of you tries to kill me, you will die, horribly, and then everyone else in the colony will follow you as each individual beam cycles through its target list. Every one of you—and your livestock, and your large pets—will be dead in roughly one of your seconds. I will be a mess, because much of what is inside of your head right now will likely get onto me, but I will be alive. And I have a fresh change of clothes in my shuttle."

The colonist and his friends stared at Sorvalh blankly.

"Well, let's get on with it," Sorvalh said. "Either try to kill me or let me do what I came here to do. It's a lovely morning and I would hate to waste it."

"What do you want?" said another colonist.

"I want to talk to your leader," Sorvalh said. "I believe his name is Jaco Smyrt."

"He won't talk to you," said the first colonist.

"Why ever not?" Sorvalh asked.

"Because you're a *xig,*" he said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"That's really unfortunate," Sorvalh said. "Because, you see, if I am not talking to Mr. Smyrt in ten of your minutes, then those particle beams I mentioned to you will cycle through their targets, and you'll all be dead, again. But I suppose if Mr. Smyrt would rather you all be dead, it's all the same to me. You might want to spend those moments with your families, gentlemen."

"I don't believe you," said a third colonist.

"Fair enough," Sorvalh said, and pointed to a small enclosure. "What do you call those animals?"

"Those are goats," said the third colonist.

"And they are adorable," said Sorvalh. "How many can you spare?"

"We can't spare any," said the second colonist.

Sorvalh sighed in exasperation. "How do you expect me to give you a demonstration if you can't spare a single goat?" she said.

"One," said the first colonist.

"You can spare one," Sorvalh said.

"Yes," the first colonist said, and one of the animals exploded before he had even finished saying the word. The rest of the goats, alarmed and covered in gore, bolted toward the farthest reaches of the enclosure.

Four minutes twenty-two seconds later, Jaco Smyrt stood in front of Sorvalh.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," she said, to him. "I see you go in for angular markings as well."

"What do you want, xig?" Smyrt said.

"Again with the 'xig,'" Sorvalh said. "I don't know what it means, but I can tell you don't mean it nicely."

"What do you *want*?" Smyrt said, through gritted teeth.

"It's not what I want, it's what you want," Sorvalh said. "And what you want is to leave this planet."

"What did you just say?" Smyrt asked.

"I believe I was perfectly clear," Sorvalh said. "But allow me to give you additional context. I am a representative of the Conclave. As you may know, we have forbidden further colonization by humans and others. You are, at least to a certain approximation, human. You're not supposed to be here. So I've arranged for you and your entire colony to go. Today."

"The fuck we will," Smyrt said. "I don't answer to the Colonial Union, I don't answer to the Conclave, and I sure as shit don't answer to *you,* xig."

"Of course you don't," Sorvalh said. "But allow me to attempt to reason with you anyway. If you leave, then you will live. If you don't leave, then you'll be killed and there will be a state of war between the Conclave and the Colonial Union, which is likely to end very poorly for the Colonial Union. Surely that matters to you."

"I can think of no better way to die than as a martyr for my race and my way of life," Smyrt said. "And if the Colonial Union dies with us, then I will welcome its diluted population as our honor guard into hell."

"A stirring sentiment," Sorvalh said. "I was told you were a believer in racial purity and such things."

"There is only one race, and it is the human race," Smyrt said. "It must be preserved and made pure. But it is better for all of humanity to fall than to remain the denatured thing it is today."

"Marvelous," Sorvalh said. "I must read your literature."

"No xig will ever read our sacred books," Smyrt said.

"It's almost touching how devoted you are to this racial ideal of yours," Sorvalh said.

"I'll die for it," Smyrt said.

"Yes, and so will everyone like you," Sorvalh said. "Because here is the thing. If you don't leave this colony today, you will die—which you are fine with, I understand—but after you're dead, I'll make a study of everyone in this pure colony of yours, to make sure I understand your *essence*. Then the Conclave will go to the Colonial Union and give it an ultimatum: Either every member of *your* pure race of human dies, or every human dies. And, well … you know how *mongrels* think, Mr. Smyrt. They have no appreciation for the perfection of purity."

"You can't do that," Smyrt said.

"Of course we *can,*" Sorvalh said. "The Conclave outnumbers the Colonial Union in every single possible way. The question is whether we *will* or not. And whether we *will* depends on you, Mr. Smyrt. Leave now, or leave the human race to the mongrels forever. I'll give you ten minutes to think it over."

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"That's a disgusting tactic you used," Gau said, as Sorvalh recounted her encounter with the Deliverance colonists.

"Well, of course it was," Sorvalh said. "When you are dealing with disgusting people, you have to speak their language."

"And it worked," Gau said.

"Yes, it did," Sorvalh said. "That ridiculous man was happy to let all of the human race die, but when it was just his tiny phenotypical slice of it, he lost his nerve. And he was convinced that we would have done it, too."

"You assured the other humans we wouldn't, I presume," Gau said.

"Colonel Rigney, whom I was dealing with, did not need the assurance," Sorvalh said. "He understood what I was planning from the

start. And as soon as I got that wretched man to agree to leave, he and his team had them in shuttles and off the planet. It was all done by local sundown."

"Then you did well," Gau said.

"I did as you asked," Sorvalh said. "Although I do feel bad about the goat."

"I'd like for you to keep this back channel with Rigney open," Gau said. "If you work well with him, maybe we can keep out of each other's way."

"Your consideration of the humans is going to become a sticking point, General," Sorvalh said. "And although this one meeting went well, I think that sooner or later our two civilizations are going to be back at each other. No back channel is going to change that. The humans are too ambitious. And so are you."

"Then let's work at making it later rather than sooner," Gau said.

"In that case, you'll want this," Sorvalh said, and took the manuscript page from her robes and gave it to General Gau. "Let the information on it—all of it—find its way to Representative Hado. Let him bring it to you in the Grand Assembly. And when he does, announce that you have seen the list, too, and that our forces have been to each of the planets and found no record of human habitation—as they will not, because the Colonial Union was thorough in removing traces. You may then accuse Hado of warmongering and possibly fabricating the document. You will break him there, or at least damage him for long enough that he will cease to be a factor."

Gau took the document. "This is what I mean when I say you are scary in your own special way, Hafte," he said.

"Why, General," Sorvalh said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

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EPISODE SEVEN

The Dog King

"Don't step on that," Harry Wilson said to Deputy Ambassador Hart Schmidt, as the latter walked up to the shuttle that the former was working on. An array of parts and tools was splayed out on a work blanket; Schmidt was on the edge of it. Wilson himself had his arm shoved deep into an outside compartment of the shuttle. From the inside of the compartment, Schmidt could hear bumping and scraping.

"What are you doing?" Schmidt asked.

"You see tools and parts and my arm shoved inside a small spacecraft, and you really have to ask what I'm doing?" Wilson said.

"I see what you're doing," Schmidt said. "I just question your ability to do it. I know you're the mission's field tech guy, but I didn't know your expertise went to shuttles."

Wilson shrugged as best he could with his arm jammed inside a shuttle. "Captain Coloma needed some help," he said. "This 'new' ship of hers is now the oldest active ship in the fleet, and she's got the rest of the crew going through all its systems with a microscope. She didn't have anyone to go over the shuttle. I didn't have anything else to do, so I volunteered."

Schmidt backed up a step and looked over the shuttle. "I don't recognize this design," he said, after a minute.

"That's probably because you weren't born when this thing was first put into service," Wilson said. "This shuttle is even older than the *Clarke*. I guess they wanted to make sure we kept the vintage theme going."

"And you know how to fix these things how, exactly?" Schmidt asked.

Wilson tapped his head with his free hand. "It's called a BrainPal, Hart," he said. "When you have a computer in your head, you can become an instant expert on anything."

"Remind me not to step inside that shuttle until someone actually qualified has worked on it," Schmidt said.

"Chicken," Wilson said, and then smiled triumphantly. "Got it," he said, extracting his arm from the shuttle compartment. In his hand was a small blackened object.

Schmidt leaned forward to look. "What is that?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say it's a bird nest," Wilson said. "But considering that Phoenix doesn't actually have native birds per se on it, it's probably a nest for something else."

"It's a bad sign when a shuttle has animal nests in it," Schmidt said.

"That's not the bad sign," Wilson said. "The bad sign is that this is the third nest I found. I think they may have literally hauled this shuttle out of a junkyard to give it to us."

"Lovely," Schmidt said.

"It's never a dull day in the lower reaches of the Colonial Union diplomatic corps," Wilson said. He set down the nest and reached for a towel to wipe the soot and grime from his hand.

"And this brings us to the reason I came down to see you," Schmidt said. "We just got our new mission assigned to us."

"Really," Wilson said. "Does this one involve me being held hostage? Or possibly being blown up in order to find a mole in the Department of State? Because I've already done those."

"I'm the first to acknowledge that the last couple of missions we've had have not ended on what are traditionally considered high notes," Schmidt said. Wilson smirked. "But I think this one may get us back on the winning track. You know of the Icheloe?"

"Never heard of them," Wilson said.

"Nice people," Schmidt said. "Look a little like a bear mated with a tick, but we can't all be beautiful. Their planet has had a civil war that's been flaring up off and on for a couple hundred years, since the king disappeared from his palace and one faction of his people blamed the other faction."

"Was it their fault?" Wilson said.

"They say no," Schmidt said. "But then they *would,* wouldn't they. In any event, the king left no heir, his sacred crown went missing and apparently between those two things no one faction could legitimately claim the throne, thus the two centuries of civil war."

"See, this is why I can't support monarchy as a system of government," Wilson said. He reached down to start reassembling the portion of the shuttle he had taken apart.

"The good news is that everyone's tired of it all and they're all looking for a face-saving way to end the conflict," Schmidt said. "The bad news is that one of the reasons they are trying to end the conflict is that they are thinking of joining the Conclave, and the Conclave won't accept them as members unless there is a single government for the entire planet. And this is where we come in."

"We're going to help them end their civil war in order to join the Conclave?" Wilson asked. "That seems counterintuitive to our own agenda."

"We've volunteered to mediate between the factions, yes," Schmidt said. "We're hoping that by doing so, we'll generate enough goodwill that the Icheloe will choose an alliance with us, not the Conclave. That in turn will help us build alliances with other races, with an eye toward establishing a counterweight to the Conclave."

"We tried that before," Wilson said, reaching for a spanner. "When that General Gau fellow was putting the Conclave together, the Colonial Union tried to form an alternative. The Counter-Conclave."

Schmidt handed him the spanner. "That wasn't about building actual alliances, though," he said. "That was about disrupting the Conclave so it couldn't form at all."

Wilson smirked at this. "And we wonder why no other intelligent race out there trusts the Colonial Union any further than they can throw us," he said. He went to work with the spanner.

"It's why this negotiation is important," Schmidt said. "The Colonial Union got a lot of credibility with the Danavar negotiations. The fact we put one of our ships in the path of a missile showed a lot of alien races that we were serious about building diplomatic solutions. If we can be seen as good-faith negotiators and mediators with the Icheloe, we're in a much better position going forward."

"Okay," Wilson said. He replaced the outside panel on the shuttle and began sealing it. "You don't have to sell me on the mission, Hart. I'm going regardless. You just need to tell me what I'm supposed to do."

"Well, so you know, Ambassador Abumwe isn't going to be the lead on this mediation," Schmidt said. "The ambassador and the rest of us will be acting in support of Ambassador Philippa Waverly, who has experience with the Icheloe and who is friendly with a Praetor Gunztar, who is acting as a go-between between the factions on the negotiating council."

"Makes sense," Wilson said.

"Ambassador Waverly doesn't travel alone," Schmidt said. "She's a little quirky."

"Okay," Wilson said, slowly. The shuttle compartment was now completely sealed.

"And the important thing to remember here is that there are no small jobs on a diplomatic mission, and that every task is important in its own unique way," Schmidt said.

"Hold on," Wilson said, and then turned around to face Schmidt directly. "Okay, hit me with it," he said. "Because with an introduction like that, whatever idiot thing you're going to have me do has got to be *good*."

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"And of course, Praetor Gunztar, you remember Tuffy," Ambassador Philippa Waverly said, motioning to her Lhasa apso, which stuck out its tongue and lolled it, winningly, at the Icheloe diplomat. Wilson held the leash attached to the dog's collar. He smiled at Praetor Gunztar as well, not that it was noticed.

"Of course I do," Praetor Gunztar exclaimed in a chittering burst duly translated by a device on his lanyard, and leaned toward the dog, which scampered with excitement. "How could I possibly forget your constant companion. I was worried that you were not going to be able to get him past quarantine."

"He had to go through the same decontamination process as the rest of us," Waverly said, nodding toward the rest of the human diplomatic mission, which included Abumwe and her staff. They had all been formally introduced to their Icheloe counterparts, with the exception of Wilson, who was clearly an adjunct to the dog. "He was very unhappy about that, but I knew he wouldn't want to miss seeing you."

Tuffy the Lhasa apso barked at this, as if to confirm that his excitement at being close to Praetor Gunztar had elevated him to near bladder-voiding levels of joy.

From behind the leash, Wilson glanced over to Schmidt, who was assiduously not looking in his direction. The entire group of them, human and Icheloe alike, were taking part in a formal presentation ceremony at the royal palace, in the same private garden where the long-missing king was last seen before the mysterious disappearance that plunged his planet into a civil war. The two groups had met in a central square surrounded by low planters arrayed in a circular design, which featured flora from all over the planet. In every planter was a spray of fleur du roi, a gorgeously sweet-smelling native flower that by law could be cultivated only by the king himself; everywhere else on the planet it was allowed only to grow wild.

Wilson remembered vaguely that the fleur du roi, like the aspen on earth, was actually a colony plant, and the sprays of flowers were all clones of one another, connected by a vast root system that could

extend for kilometers. He knew this because as part of his dog-minding job, he needed to find out which plants in the private garden could tolerate being peed on by Tuffy. He was pretty sure that the fleur du roi would be hardy enough if it came to that, and it almost certainly would. Tuffy was the only dog on the planet. That was a lot of territory to mark.

"Now that we have all been introduced, I believe it is time to move forward with our initial meeting," Praetor Gunztar said, turning his attention away from the Lhasa apso and back again to Ambassador Waverly. "Today I thought we'd take care of merely procedural items, such as confirming the agenda and opening formal statements."

"That would of course be fine," Waverly said.

"Excellent," Gunztar said. "One reason for a short schedule today is that I would like to offer you and your people a special consideration. You may not know that the royal palace sits above one of the most extensive cave systems on the planet, one that ultimately travels almost two kilometers into the planet and meets up with a vast subterranean river. The caves have been used by the palace as a keep, as a place of refuge and even as a catacomb for the royal family. I would like to offer you a tour of these caves, which no one but Icheloe have been in before. It's a token of our appreciation for the Colonial Union's willingness to mediate these possibly contentious negotiations."

"What an honor," Waverly said. "And of course we accept. The caves really descend that far into the planet?"

"Yes, although we will not follow them down that deep," Gunztar said. "They are blocked off for reasons of security. But what you will see is extensive enough. The cave system is so vast that even now it has never been fully explored."

"How fascinating," Waverly said. "If nothing else, it will give us an impetus to get through the day's business as quickly as possible."

"There's that, too," Gunztar said, and everyone had a laugh, in their own species' fashion, at this. Then the entire mass, human and Icheloe,

was herded toward the palace, to the suite of rooms reserved for the negotiations themselves.

As they moved, Waverly glanced toward Abumwe, who in turn glanced toward Schmidt, who held back with Wilson. Wilson stood, hand on leash, restraining the little dog, who was becoming anxious at seeing his mistress wander off without him.

"So, today will just be a couple of hours," Schmidt said. "The agenda's already been agreed to by both sides, so all we're doing is going through the motions. All you have to do is keep Tuffy here busy until we break. After today you and Tuffy will be at our embassy for the duration."

"I've got it, Hart," Wilson said. "This isn't exactly rocket science."

"You've got all your stuff?" Schmidt asked.

Wilson pointed to a jacket pocket. "Kibble and treats here," he said. He pointed to a trouser pocket. "Poop bags here. The pee I'm not picking up."

"Fair enough," Schmidt said.

"They know he's going to do his business, right?" Wilson asked. "It's not going to cause a major diplomatic incident if one of the grounds staff here sees li'l Tuffy in a poop squat, right? Because I am not ready to deal with that sort of thing."

"It's one of the reasons you're staying behind here," Schmidt said. "It's a private garden. He's been given approval for taking care of business. We've been asked not to let him do any digging."

"If he does that, I can just pick him up," Wilson said.

"I know I said it before, but sorry about this, Harry," Schmidt said. "Dog sitting isn't in your job description."

"*De nada,*" Wilson said, and then rephrased at the sight of Schmidt's puzzled expression. "It's no big deal, Hart," he said. "It's like working on the shuttle. Someone's got to do it, and everyone else has something more useful to do. Yes, I'm overqualified to watch the dog. That just means you don't have to worry about anything. And that you owe me drinks after this."

"All right," Schmidt said, smiling. "But if something *does* happen, I have my PDA set to accept your call."

"Will you please get out of here now and go be useful to someone," Wilson said. "Before I have Tuffy here mate with your boot."

Tuffy looked up at Schmidt, apparently hopefully. Schmidt left hastily. Tuffy looked over to Wilson.

"You leave *my* boots alone, pal," Wilson said.

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I have a problem, Wilson sent to Schmidt, roughly an hour later.

What is it? Schmidt sent back, using the texting function of his PDA so as not to interrupt the talks.

It would be best explained in person, Wilson sent.

Is this about the dog? Schmidt sent.

Sort of, Wilson sent.

Sort of? Schmidt sent. *Is the dog okay?*

Well, it's alive, Wilson sent.

Schmidt got up as quickly and quietly as possible and headed to the garden.

"We give you one thing to do," Schmidt said, as he walked up to Wilson. "One thing. Walk the damn dog. You said I didn't have to worry about *anything*."

Wilson held up his hands. "This is not my fault," he said. "I swear to God."

Schmidt looked around. "Where's the dog?"

"He's here," Wilson said. "Kind of."

"What does that even mean?" Schmidt said.

From somewhere came a muffled bark.

Schmidt looked around. "I hear the dog," he said. "But I can't see it."

The bark repeated, followed by several more. Schmidt followed the noise and eventually found himself at the edge of a planter filled with fleur du roi flowers.

Schmidt looked over to Wilson. "All right, I give up. Where is it?"

Another bark. From inside the planter.

From *below the planter*.

Schmidt looked over to Wilson, confused.

"The flowers ate the dog," Wilson said.

"What?" Schmidt said.

"I swear to God," Wilson said. "One second Tuffy was standing in the planter, peeing on the flowers. The next, the soil below him *opened up* and something pulled him under."

"*What* pulled him under?" Schmidt asked.

"How should I know, Hart?" Wilson said, exasperated. "I'm not a botanist. When I went over and looked, there was a *thing* underneath the dirt. The flowers were sprouting up from it. They're part of it."

Schmidt leaned over the planter for a look. The dirt in the planter had been flung about and below it he could see a large, fibrous bulge with a meter-long seam running across its top surface.

Another bark. From *inside* the bulge.

"Holy shit," Schmidt said.

"I know," Wilson said.

"It's like a Venus flytrap or something," Schmidt said.

"Which is not a good thing for the dog," Wilson pointed out.

"What do we do?" Schmidt asked, looking at Wilson.

"I don't know," Wilson said. "That's why I called you in the first place, Hart."

The dog barked again.

"We can't just leave him down there," Schmidt said.

"I agree," Wilson said. "I am open to suggestion."

Schmidt thought about it for a moment and then abruptly took off in the direction of the entrance to the garden. Wilson watched him go, confused.

Schmidt reemerged a couple of minutes later with an Icheloe, dusty and garbed in items that were caked with dirt.

"This is the garden groundskeeper," Schmidt said. "Talk to him."

"You're going to have to translate for me," Wilson said. "My BrainPal can translate what he says for me, but I can't speak in his language."

"Hold on," Schmidt said. He pulled out his PDA and accessed the translation program, then handed it to Wilson. "Just talk. It'll take care of the rest."

"Hi," Wilson said, to the groundskeeper. The PDA chittered out something in the Icheloe language.

"Hello," said the groundskeeper, and then looked over to the planter that had swallowed the dog. "What have you done to my planter?"

"Well, see, that's the thing," Wilson said. "I didn't do anything to the planter. The planter, on the other hand, ate my dog."

"You're talking about that small noisy creature the human ambassador brought with it?" the groundskeeper asked.

"Yes, that's it," Wilson said. "It went into the planter to relieve itself and the next thing I know it's been swallowed whole."

"Well, of course it was," the groundskeeper said. "What did you expect?"

"I didn't expect anything," Wilson said. "No one told me there was a dog-eating plant here in the garden."

The groundskeeper looked at Wilson and then Schmidt. "No one told you about the kingsflower?"

"The only thing I know about it is that it's a colony plant," Wilson said. "That most if it exists under the dirt and that the flowers are the visible part. The thing about it being carnivorous is new to me."

"The flowers are a lure," the groundskeeper said. "In the wild, a woodland creature will be drawn in by the flowers and while it's grazing it will get pulled under."

"Right," Wilson said. "That's what happened to the dog."

"There's a digestion chamber underneath the flowers," the groundskeeper said. "It's big enough that a large-size animal can't climb out. Eventually one of two things happens. Either the creature starves

and dies or asphyxiates and dies. Then the plant digests it and the nutrients go to feed the entire colony."

"How long does that take?" Schmidt asked.

"Three or four of our days," the groundskeeper said, and then pointed at the planter. "This particular kingsflower has been in this garden since before the disappeared king. We usually feed it a kharhn once every ten days or so. Tomorrow is a feeding day, so it was getting a little hungry. That's why it ate your creature."

"I wish someone had told me about this earlier," Wilson said.

The groundskeeper gave the Icheloe equivalent of a shrug. "We thought you knew. I was wondering why you were letting your, what do you call it, a dog?" Wilson nodded. "Why you let your *dog* wander through the kingsflowers, but we were informed ahead of time to allow the creature free rein of the garden. So I decided that it was not my problem."

"Even though you knew the dog could get eaten," Wilson said.

"Maybe you *wanted* the dog to get eaten," the groundskeeper said. "It's entirely possible you brought the dog as a treat for the kingsflower as a diplomatic gesture. *I* don't know. All I do is tend to the plants."

"Well, assuming we didn't want the dog to get eaten, how do we get it back?" Wilson asked.

"I have no idea," the groundskeeper said. "No one has ever asked that question before."

Wilson glanced over to Schmidt, who offered up a helpless gesture with his hands.

"Let me put it this way," Wilson said. "Do you have any objection to me *trying* to retrieve the dog?"

"How are you going to do that?" the groundskeeper wanted to know.

"Go in the same way the dog did," Wilson said. "And hopefully come back out the same way."

"Interesting," the groundskeeper said. "I'll go get some rope."

• • •

"You should probably rub against the flowers a bit," the groundskeeper said, motioning to the fleur du roi. "Your dog was not especially large. The kingsflower is probably still hungry."

Wilson looked doubtfully at the groundskeeper but nudged the flowers with his feet. "It doesn't seem to be doing anything," he said, kicking at the plant.

"Wait for it," said the groundskeeper.

"How long should I—," Wilson began, and then dirt flew and fibrous tentacles wrapped around his legs, constricting.

"Oh, that's not good," Schmidt said.

"Not helping," Wilson said, to Schmidt.

"Sorry," Schmidt said.

"Don't be alarmed when the plant starts cutting off the circulation to your extremities," the groundskeeper said. "It's a perfectly normal part of the process."

"That's easy for you to say," Wilson said. "You're not losing feeling in your legs."

"Remember that the plant wants to eat you," the groundskeeper said. "It's not going to let you get away. Don't fight it. Let yourself be eaten."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm finding your advice to be less than one hundred percent helpful," Wilson said to the groundskeeper. The plant was now beginning to drag him under.

"I'm sorry," the groundskeeper said. "Usually the kharhn we feed to the kingsflower are already dead. I never get to see anything live fed to it. This is exciting for me."

Wilson fought hard not to roll his eyes. "Glad you're enjoying the show," he said. "Will you hand me that rope now, please?"

"What?" the groundskeeper said, then remembered what he had in his hands. "Right. Sorry." He handed one end of the rope to Wilson,

who quickly tied it to himself in a mountain climber hold. Schmidt took the other end from the groundskeeper.

"Don't lose your grip," Wilson said. He was now up to his groin in plant. "I don't want to be fully digested."

"You'll be fine," Schmidt said, encouragingly.

"Next time it's your turn," Wilson said.

"I'll pass," Schmidt said.

More tentacles shot up, roping around Wilson's shoulder and head. "Okay, I am officially not liking this anymore," he said.

"Is it painful?" the groundskeeper asked. "I am asking for science."

"Do you mind if we hold the questions until afterward?" Wilson asked. "I'm kind of busy at the moment."

"Yes, sorry," the groundskeeper said. "I'm just excited. Damn it!" The Icheloe started patting his garments. "I should be recording this."

Wilson glanced over to Schmidt, looking as exasperated as he could under the circumstances. Schmidt shrugged. It had been a strange day.

"This is it," Wilson said. Only his head was above the surface now. Between the tentacles constricting and dragging him down and the pulsing, peristaltic motion of the fleur du roi plant sucking him down into the ground, he was reasonably sure he was going to have post-traumatic flashbacks for months.

"Hold your breath!" the groundskeeper said.

"Why?" Wilson wanted to know.

"It couldn't hurt!" the groundskeeper said. Wilson was going to make a sarcastic reply to this but then realized that, in fact, it couldn't hurt. He took a deep breath.

The plant sucked him fully under.

"This is the best day ever," said the groundskeeper to Schmidt.

• • •

Wilson had a minute or two of suffocating closeness from the plant as the thing pushed him into its digestive sac. Then there was a drop as he

fell from the thing's throat into its belly. The fall was broken by a spongy, wet mass at the bottom: the plant's digestive floor.

"Are you in?" Schmidt said, to Wilson, via his BrainPal.

"Where else do you think I would be?" Wilson said, out loud. His BrainPal would forward the voice to Schmidt.

"Can you see Tuffy?" Schmidt asked.

"Give me a second," Wilson said. "It's dark down here. I need to give my eyes a moment to adjust."

"Take your time," Schmidt said.

"Thanks," Wilson said, sarcastically.

Thirty seconds later, Wilson's genetically-engineered eyes had adjusted to the very dim light from above to see his environment, a dank, teardop-shaped organic capsule barely large enough to stand in and stretch his arms.

Wilson looked around and then said, "Uh."

"'Uh'?" Schmidt said. "'Uh' is not usually good."

"Ask the groundskeeper how long it takes this thing to digest something," Wilson said.

"The groundskeeper says it usually takes several days," Schmidt said. "Why?"

"We have a problem," Wilson said.

"Is Tuffy dead already?" Schmidt asked, alarm in his voice.

"I don't know," Wilson said. "The damn thing isn't here."

"Where did he go?" Schmidt asked.

"If I knew that, Hart, I wouldn't be saying 'uh,' now, would I?" Wilson said, irritated. "Give me a minute." He peered hard into the dim. After a minute, he got down on his hands and knees and moved toward a small shadow near the base of the capsule. "There's a tear here," Wilson said, after examining the shadow. "Behind the tear it looks like there's a small tunnel or something."

"The groundskeeper says the rock bed below the palace is riddled with fissures and tunnels," Schmidt said, after a brief pause. "It's part of the cave system that's underneath the palace."

"Do the tunnels and fissures go anywhere?" Wilson asked.

"He says 'maybe,'" Schmidt said. "They've never mapped the entire system."

From deep inside the black tunnel, Wilson heard a very small, echoing bark.

"Okay, good news," Wilson said. "The dog's still alive. Bad news: The dog is still alive somewhere down a very small, dark tunnel."

"Can you go down the tunnel?" Schmidt asked.

Wilson looked and then felt around the wall of the capsule. "How does our groundskeeper friend feel about me tearing into the plant wall a little bit?" he asked.

"He says that in the wild these plants have to deal with wild animals kicking and tearing at their insides all the time, so you're not going to hurt it too much," Schmidt said. "Just don't tear it any more than you have to."

"Got it," Wilson said. "Also, Hart, do me a favor and throw me down a light, please."

"The only light I have is on my PDA," Schmidt said.

"Ask the groundskeeper," Wilson said.

Down the tunnel, there was a sudden, surprised yelp.

"Ask him to hurry, please," Wilson said.

A couple minutes later, the mouth of the plant opened and a small object tumbled down into the capsule. Wilson retrieved the light, switched it on, lifted the tear and shone the light down the tunnel, sweeping it around to get an idea of its dimensions. He figured if he crawled, he might barely be able to make his way down the tunnel. The tunnel itself was long enough that the light shone down into darkness.

"I'm going to have to undo the rope," Wilson said. "It's not long enough to go all the way down this tunnel."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Schmidt said.

"Being swallowed by a carnivorous plant isn't a good idea," Wilson said, undoing the rope. "Compared to that, letting go of the rope is nothing."

"What if you get lost down there?" Schmidt asked.

"My BrainPal will let you know where I am, and I'll let you know if I get stuck," Wilson said. "You'll be able to tell by the screaming panic in my voice."

"Okay," Schmidt said. "Also, I don't know if this is information that you need to know right now, but I just got a ping from Ambassador Waverly's assistant. She says the negotiations should wrap up in an hour and then the ambassador will want Tuffy for, and I swear to God this is a quote, 'a little snuggle time.'"

"Wonderful," Wilson said. "Well, at least now we know how much time we have."

"One hour," Schmidt said. "Happy spelunking. Try not to die."

"Right," Wilson said. He knelt at the tear, tore it just enough to shove his body through, put the light between his teeth, got on his hands and knees and started crawling.

The first hundred meters were the easy part; the tunnel was narrow and low, but dry and relatively straight as it descended through the rock. Wilson figured that if he had to guess, he'd venture it was once a lava tube at some point, but at the moment all he really wanted was for the thing not to collapse on him. He wasn't ordinarily claustrophobic, but he'd also never been dozens of meters down a tube in a rock, either. He thought he was allowed a spot of unease.

After a hundred meters or so, the tube became slightly wider and higher but also more jagged and twisting, and the angle of descent became substantially steeper. Wilson hoped that somewhere along the way the tunnel might become wide enough for him to turn around in; he didn't like the idea of having to back out ass first, dragging the dog along with him.

"How is it going?" Schmidt asked him.

"Come down here and find out," Wilson said, around his light. Schmidt demurred.

Every twenty meters or so Wilson would call out to Tuffy, who would bark some times but not others. After close to an hour of

crawling, the barks finally began to sound like they were getting closer. After almost exactly an hour, Wilson could hear two things: Schmidt beginning to sweat up on the surface and the scrabbling sounds of a creature moving some distance ahead.

The tunnel suddenly widened and then disappeared into blackness. Wilson carefully approached what was now the lip of the tunnel, took the light out of his mouth and panned it around.

The cave was about ten meters long, four or five meters wide and roughly five meters deep. To the side of the tunnel lip was a pile of scree that formed a steep slope to the floor of the cave; directly in front of the lip, however, was a straight drop. Wilson's light played across the scree and caught glimpses of dusty paw marks; Tuffy had avoided the drop.

Wilson directed the light to the floor cave, calling out to the dog as he did so. The dog didn't bark, but Wilson heard the clitter of nails on the floor. Suddenly Tuffy was in the light cone, eyes reflecting green up at Wilson.

"There you are, you little pain in the ass," Wilson said. The dog was dusty but otherwise seemed unharmed by his little adventure. He had something in his jaws; Wilson peered closely. It looked like a bone of some sort. Apparently, Tuffy wasn't the first live animal to get sucked down into the fleur du roi after all; something else fell in and escaped down the tunnel behind the tear, just to die in this dead-end cave.

Tuffy got bored of looking into the light and turned to wander off. As he did, Wilson caught a glimpse of something sparkly attached to the dog; he trained his light on the animal as it moved and focused on the sparkly bit. Whatever it was was stuck to Tuffy in some way, encircling one of the dog's shoulders and riding around to his undercarriage.

"What the hell is that?" Wilson said to himself. He was still following Tuffy with the light, which was why he finally saw the skeleton of the creature the dog had taken his chew toy from. The skeleton was roughly a meter and a half long and mostly intact; it was

missing what looked like a rib—which was what Tuffy was now chewing on quite contentedly—and its head. Wilson flicked the light slightly and caught the white flash of something round. *Ah,* thought Wilson. *There's the head, then*.

It took him a few seconds to realize that what he was looking at was the skeleton of an Icheloe adult.

It took another few seconds, and Tuffy wandering through the light cone, sparkling as he did so, before Wilson realized which Icheloe's skeleton it was likely to be.

"Oh, shit," Wilson said, out loud.

"Harry?" Schmidt said, suddenly cutting in. "Uh, just so you know, I'm not alone on this end anymore. And we have a bit of a problem here."

"We have a bit of a problem on this end, too, Hart," Wilson said.

"I'm guessing your problem isn't Ambassador Waverly looking for her dog," Schmidt said.

"No," Wilson said. "It's oh so very much larger."

There was an indignant squawk on the other end of the line; Wilson imagined Schmidt putting his hand over the PDA's microphone to keep Wilson from hearing ambassadorial venting. "Is it Tuffy? Is Tuffy all right?" More squawking. "Is Tuffy, uh, *alive*?"

"Tuffy is fine, Tuffy is alive, Tuffy is perfectly good," Wilson said. "But I've found something down here that's none of those things."

"What do you mean?" Schmidt said.

"Hart," Wilson said, "I'm pretty sure I just found the lost king."

• • •

"Do you hear that?" Ambassador Waverly said, pointing out the window of one of the many sitting rooms of the royal palace. The window was open, and in the distance was a rhythmic chittering that reminded Wilson of the cicadas that would fill the midwestern nights with their white noise. These were not cicadas.

"Those are protesters," Waverly said. "Thousands of Icheloe reactionaries who are here to demand a return to royalty." She pointed at Wilson. "*You* did that. More than a year of background work and persuasion and angling to get us a seat at the table—more than a year to line up the dominoes just right for us to position this negotiation as the first step to make a legitimate counter to the Conclave—and you blow it all in *two hours*. Congratulations, Lieutenant Wilson."

"Wilson didn't intend to find the lost king, Philippa," Ambassador Abumwe said, to her counterpart. She was in the room with Wilson and Waverly. Schmidt was there, too, pulled in because he was, as Waverly put it, an "accomplice" to Wilson's shenanigans. Tuffy was also present, gnawing on a toy ball volunteered by the palace staff. Wilson had discreetly separated Tuffy from the royal bones long before they both had exited the cave. The crown remained with the dog; it had somehow attached itself and refused to be removed. All five were awaiting the return of Praetor Gunztar, who had been pulled into emergency consultations.

"It doesn't matter what he *intended* to do," Waverly shot back. "What matters is what he *did* do. And what he did was single-handedly disrupt a long-running diplomatic process. Now the Icheloe are back on the verge of civil war and we are to blame."

"It doesn't have to be as bad as that," Abumwe said. "If nothing else, we've solved the disappearance of the king, which was the cause of the civil war. The war started because one faction blamed the other for kidnapping and killing him. Now we know that never happened."

"And that simply doesn't *matter,*" Waverly said. "You know as well as I that the disappearance of the king was just the polite fiction the factions needed to go after each other with guns and knives. If it hadn't been the king going missing, they would have found some other reason to go at each other's throats. What's important now is that they wanted to end that fight." Waverly pointed again at Wilson. "But now *he's* dragged up that damn king, giving the hard-liners on both sides a new pointless excuse to go after each other."

"We don't know that will be the outcome," Abumwe said. "You had confidence in the process before. At the end of the day, the Icheloe still want their peace."

"But will they still want it with *us*?" Waverly said, looking over. "Now that we've unnecessarily disrupted their peace process and added complications to it? That's the question. I hope you're right, Ode. I really do. But I have my doubts." She turned her gaze back to Wilson. "And do you have any thoughts on this subject, Lieutenant Wilson?"

Wilson glanced over to Abumwe, whose face was neutral, and at Schmidt, who had preemptively gone pale. "I'm sorry I unnecessarily disrupted your process, Ambassador," he said. "I apologize." In his peripheral vision, Wilson could see Schmidt's eyes widen. Hart clearly wasn't expecting deference from his friend.

"You apologize," Waverly said, walking over to him. "You're sorry. That's all you have to say."

"Yes, I think so, ma'am," Wilson said. "Unless you think there's something else I should add."

"I think your resignation would be in order," Waverly said.

Wilson smiled at this. "The Colonial Defense Forces isn't generally keen on resignations, Ambassador Waverly."

"And that's your final comment on the matter," Waverly said, persisting.

Wilson glanced very briefly at Abumwe and caught her almost imperceptible shrug. "Well, except to say that I know what to do the next time something like this happens," he said.

"And what is that?" Waverly said.

"Let the plant keep the dog," Wilson said.

Praetor Gunztar opened the door to the room before Waverly had a chance to explode at Wilson. She whirled toward Gunztar instead with such sudden ferocity that even the praetor, who was no great reader of human emotion, could not miss it. "Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Of course, Praetor Gunztar," Waverly said, tightly.

"Very good," Gunztar said, barreling through before Waverly could launch into anything further. "I have news. Some of it is good. Some of it is less so."

"All right," Waverly said.

"The good news—the *great* news—is that leaders of both factions agree that no one was responsible for the killing of the king, except for the king himself," Gunztar said. "It was well-known the king was a heavy drinker and that he would often stroll in his private garden at night. The most obvious explanation is that the king was drunk, collapsed into the kingsflower planter, and the plant pulled him under. When he awoke, he tried to escape and followed the tunnel to his death. The garden was part of his private residence and he was a bachelor; no one looked for him until his staff went to wake him in the morning."

"Didn't anyone at the time think to look inside the plant?" Abumwe asked.

"They did, of course," Gunztar said. "But it was not until much later, when more obvious places were searched. And by that time, there was no trace of the king. It seems that he may have wandered down the tunnel by that time and was either dead or too injured by the fall into the cave to call for help. The bones show his spine was shattered in several places, consistent with a fall."

Wilson, who remembered Tuffy chewing on at least a couple of other bones aside from the rib, kept quiet.

"This is good news because one continual sticking point between the factions has been finding some way to finesse the disappearance of the king," Gunztar said. "The question of blame and responsibility are still sore subjects. Or were. Now they no longer are. During our discussions, the head of the pro-king faction provisionally apologized for blaming the agitators for killing the king. The head of the agitator faction provisionally expressed sorrow at the death of the king. As long as it sticks, the job here has become substantially easier."

"Wow," Wilson said. "And here I thought that the disappearance of the king was just a convenient excuse already warring factions were

using to go after each other."

"Of course not," Gunztar said, turning toward Wilson and thereby missing the flush that drove itself up Waverly's neck and face. "To be certain, the factions were ready to fight. But our civil war would not have lasted so long, nor have been so bloody, had one side not accused the other of regicide. And so the Icheloe owe you a particular debt of thanks, Lieutenant Wilson, for what you have done for us today."

"If you thank anyone, you should thank Ambassador Waverly, Praetor Gunztar," Wilson said. "Without her, I would never have found your lost king. After all, she is the one who brought Tuffy."

"Yes, of course," Gunztar said, bowing in the Icheloe way to Ambassador Waverly. She, still furious at Wilson and yet also aware of how he had just transferred credit for the praise to her, nodded mutely. "And that, I'm afraid, brings us to our bad news."

"What's the bad news?" Waverly said.

"It's about Tuffy," Gunztar said. "The crown is attached to him."

"Yes," Waverly said. "It's tangled in his hair. We'll get it out. We'll trim his hair down if we have to."

"It's not that simple," Gunztar said. "You can't get it off him because it's tangled in his hair. You can't get it off him because microscopic fibers have come off the crown and physically attached themselves to him, binding the crown to his physical body."

"What?" Waverly said.

"The crown is permanently attached to Tuffy," Gunztar said. "The scans our medical scientists did when he was brought back to the surface show it."

"How could that possibly happen?" Abumwe asked.

"The crown is a very important symbol of the king," Gunztar said. "Once taken up, it was supposed to never be taken off." He pointed to a set of ridges on his own head. "The crown is designed to sit on the head of the king in such a way that it need never be removed. To assure that it never is, it is made with nanobiotic strands on the inside surface, tuned to graft to the genetic signature of the king. The crown is also

sensitive to the electrical signals produced by life. It only comes off at death, when all brain and body activity are quiet."

"How did it get attached to Tuffy?" Waverly said. "He obviously has no genetic relation to your king."

"It's a mystery to us as much as you," Gunztar said.

"Hmmmm," Wilson said.

"What is it, Wilson?" Abumwe said.

"How much of this genetic material would need to be present for the crown to register it?" Wilson said.

"You'd have to ask our scientists," Gunztar said. "Why?"

Wilson motioned to Tuffy, who had dozed off. "When I found him, he was chewing on one of the king's bones," he said. "He'd been in and around that skeleton for at least an hour. More than enough time to get some of the king's genetic material all over him. If the crown wasn't programmed well, it might have registered the genetic material, registered electrical signals from Tuffy being alive and decided, 'Well, close enough.'"

"So we give Tuffy a bath, wash off all the king's, uh, dust, and the crown lets go," Schmidt said. "Right?"

Wilson looked over at Gunztar, who offered up a negative gesture. "No. Only death will cause the crown to let go," he said. He turned to Ambassador Waverly. "And the council, I'm afraid, is adamant that the crown must be removed."

Waverly looked blankly at Gunztar for the ten seconds or so it took for what the praetor said to sink in. Wilson glanced over to Schmidt and Abumwe as if to say, *Here it comes*.

"You want to kill my dog?!" Waverly exclaimed to Gunztar.

Gunztar immediately threw up his hands. "We don't *want* to kill Tuffy," he said, quickly. "But you must understand, my friend. The crown is an object of truly immense historical, political and social value. It is no exaggeration to say that it is one of the most iconic and significant objects we Icheloe have. It's been missing for generations. Its importance to us is incalculable. And your *dog* is wearing it."

"It's not *his* fault," Waverly said.

"I agree, of course," Gunztar said. "But ultimately that is neither here nor there. The council is unanimous that the crown must not stay on your dog." He pointed out the window, toward the chittering masses gathered in front of the palace. "The reactionaries we have at the gate don't represent our people at large, but there are enough of them to cause trouble. If they were to find out a *pet* wore the crown of the disappeared king, the riots would last for days. And I would be lying to you if I said there weren't those on the council who didn't find the fact Tuffy wears the crown deeply insulting. One of them even began calling him 'the Dog King.' And not in an affectionate way."

"You're saying Tuffy wearing the crown is jeopardizing our diplomatic mission," Abumwe said.

"Not yet," Gunztar said. "The fact that you found the disappeared king far outweighs the issue of the crown, for now. But the longer it takes for it to be returned to us, the more questions the negotiating council will begin to have about it. Make no mistake that eventually it will jeopardize your mission, and your standing. And the standing of the Colonial Union."

"Philippa," Abumwe said, to Waverly.

Waverly said nothing, looked at them all and then went over to Tuffy, who was by this time on his back, paws adorably in the air, snoring lightly. Waverly sat next to her dog, picked him up, waking him in the process, and began sobbing into his little back. The dog craned his head back and heroically tried to lick the head of his owner, hitting only air instead.

"Oh, come *on,*" Wilson said, after roughly thirty seconds of awkward silence from everyone in the room except Ambassador Waverly, who continued sobbing. "I feel like I'm twelve and being made to reread the last couple chapters of *Old Yeller*."

"Lieutenant Wilson, it might be advisable to let Ambassador Waverly have her moment with Tuffy," Praetor Gunztar said. "It is hard to say good-bye to a friend."

"So we're all agreed that we're going to have to kill the dog," Wilson said.

"*Wilson,*" Abumwe said, sharply.

Wilson held up his hand. "I'm not asking just to be an asshole," he assured Abumwe. "I'm asking because if we're all agreed that's what has to happen, then no one will look at me like I'm nuts for offering a completely insane potential solution."

"What solution?" Abumwe asked.

Wilson walked over and stood by Waverly and Tuffy. Tuffy lolled his tongue out at Wilson; Waverly looked up at him with deeply suspicious eyes.

"Badly-designed technology got us into this problem," Wilson said, looking down at Tuffy and Waverly. "Maybe better-designed technology can get us out of it."

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"Here you go," Schmidt said, handing Wilson the small wand with a plunger button on top and then motioning with his head to two nervous-looking Icheloe technicians. "Press the button, everything goes down. Press the button again, hopefully everything comes back up again."

"Got it," Wilson said. He watched as another Icheloe technician brought in Tuffy and placed him on a stainless steel table, a small work towel placed in the middle to keep the dog's feet from getting too cold.

"The technicians also wanted me to tell you thank you for being willing to be the one to press the button," Schmidt said.

"Of course," Wilson said. "Ambassador Waverly already hates my guts. And if this doesn't work, then better it's someone on our side than one of the Icheloe."

"Their thinking exactly," Schmidt said.

"How is Ambassador Waverly, anyway?" Wilson asked. He hadn't seen her for several hours.

"Abumwe is with her now," Schmidt said. "I think the plan is to keep feeding her alcohol."

"It's not a bad plan," Wilson said.

Schmidt looked at his friend. "How do you feel?"

"I feel fine, Hart," Wilson said. "I'd like to get this over with, however."

"Can I get you some juice or anything?" Schmidt asked.

"What you can do is help that technician with Tuffy," Wilson said, nodding to the Icheloe tech holding the squirming dog. "He looks like he's about to lose it." Schmidt hurried over and took the dog from the tech, then settled it down on the table. The tech backed away quickly, obviously relieved to be rid of her burden. The other two techs also quietly excused themselves.

"You want me to go?" Schmidt asked, petting Tuffy to keep the dog still.

"No, I need you to help me," Wilson said. "You might want to move your hands, though."

"Oh, right," Schmidt said, and moved a step away from the dog.

Tuffy moved to go after Schimdt, but Wilson said, "Tuffy!" and snapped his fingers at the same time, drawing the little dog's attention to himself.

"Good dog," Wilson said, to Tuffy, who gave him a happy doggie smile and wagged his fluffy little tail.

Wilson accessed his BrainPal and got the feed on the two small monitors the dog had on his body, one at the top of his head and the other on his chest, close to his heart. The two monitors showed Tuffy's brain and heart electrical activity. There was something else on his body as well, at the back of his neck, close to where his spinal cord met his brain. Wilson didn't have a monitor for it.

"Tuffy! Sit!" Wilson said.

The dog sat, winningly obliging.

"Good boy!" Wilson said. "Play dead!" He pressed the plunger button in his hand.

Tuffy's brain and heart monitors flatlined instantly. The Lhasa apso gave a tiny squeak and collapsed stiffly, like a stuffed animal blown over by a wind gust.

"'Play dead'?" Schmidt said, ten seconds later, after examining the dog. "That's just *cruel*."

"If this doesn't work, I'll have bigger problems than a tasteless joke," Wilson said. "Now, shut up for a couple of minutes, Hart. You're making me nervous."

"Sorry," Schmidt said. Wilson nodded and walked over to the dog on the table.

Tuffy was dead.

Wilson poked the body with a finger. No response at all.

"Any time," Wilson said. The Icheloe had assured him that their biological systems were similar enough to those of Earth vertebrates that Wilson was willing to risk his little experiment. Nevertheless, he wanted the crown to realize its wearer was dead sooner than later.

A minute passed. Two.

"Harry?" Schmidt asked.

"Quiet," Wilson said, staring at the crown, still nestled on the dog's body.

Another two minutes passed. Three.

"What do we do if this doesn't work?" Schmidt asked.

"Are you asking if there's a plan B?" Wilson asked.

"Yeah," Schmidt said.

"Sorry, no," Wilson said.

"Why are you telling me this now?" Schmidt asked.

"Why didn't you ask earlier?" Wilson asked.

Another minute.

"*There,*" Wilson said, pointing.

"What?" Schmidt said.

"The crown moved," Wilson said.

"I didn't see anything," Schmidt said.

"You remember that part where my genetically-engineered eyes are about ten times better than yours, right, Hart?" Wilson said.

"Oh, that," Schmidt said.

"Remove the crown, please," Wilson said.

Schmidt reached over to the dog and gently removed the crown from the body. It came off easily.

"Got it," Schmidt said.

"Thank you," Wilson said. "Stand back now." Schmidt backed away from the table.

"Okay, Tuffy," Wilson said, looked at the dog and raised his wand. "Time to learn a new trick."

He plunged the button down a second time.

The dog twitched, peed himself and scrambled up from the table, barking furiously.

"Wow, he's pissed," Schmidt said, smiling.

"True in more than one way, and a totally appropriate response," Wilson said, smiling himself.

The Icheloe flooded back into the room, one of them carrying a bag full of red fluid: Tuffy's actual blood.

"Wait," Wilson said, and realized the Icheloe had no idea what he was saying. He made himself clear through gestures and then turned to Schmidt. "Tell one of them to go get Ambassador Waverly, please," he said. "I want her to see that her dog is fine before we transfuse the poor thing again."

Schmidt nodded and spoke to the Icheloe through his PDA. One of them departed in a hurry.

One of the other Icheloe pointed to the dog and looked at Wilson. "How is it that you could give this animal your blood?" Wilson's BrainPal translated the Icheloe's chitter as saying. "You're not even the same species."

Wilson reached over and borrowed Schmidt's PDA. "It's called SmartBlood," he said, setting the PDA in front of him. "It's completely non-organic, so the dog's body wouldn't reject it. It also has several

times the oxygen-carrying capacity, so we could stop the body's processes for a longer period of time and still have the tissues survive." Wilson reached over and picked up the still-damp dog, who had stopped barking by this time. "And that's what we did. Replaced this little guy's blood with my blood, then stopped this little guy's heart and brain long enough for the crown to think he's dead. Then started him up again."

"It seems risky," the Icheloe said.

"It *was* risky," Wilson said. "But the alternative was worse."

"You mean us breaking off our diplomatic relationship with you," said the other Icheloe.

"Well, I was actually thinking of a dead dog," Wilson said. "But yes, that, too."

Ambassador Waverly appeared in the doorway, Abumwe and Praetor Gunztar behind her. Tuffy saw his mistress and barked happily. Wilson set the dog on the floor; Tuffy's nails skittered adorably across the floor surface as he raced over to Waverly.

Everyone dissolved into a puddle of *awwwww*.

"This is just about the perfect ending, isn't it?" Schmidt said to Wilson, quietly.

"Just about," Wilson agreed.

"And I suppose we are to make a pact never to speak of this again," Schmidt said.

"I think that's the wisest course, yes," Wilson said.

"I concur," Schmidt said. "Furthermore, I suggest that we now commence to get drunk."

"Agreed," Wilson said. "I seem to recall you promising me a drink at the end of all this."

"Do you want us to pour back in that pint of SmartBlood you gave to Tuffy before we do?" Schmidt said.

"You know, I think I'll be fine without it," Wilson said.

They watched as Waverly and Tuffy wandered off together, followed by some very concerned Icheloe, carrying Tuffy's bag of

blood.

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EPISODE EIGHT

The Sound of Rebellion

Heather Lee heard the whisper of the slap's approach before she felt it, a strike designed to bring her back into consciousness. With the hit, she took a sharp intake of breath and tried to get her bearings.

She quickly became aware of three things. One, she was nude underneath a rough blanket that draped her body as she sat in a chair of some sort.

Two, she was restrained, with her wrists, ankles, neck and waist strapped down to the chair.

Three, she was blind, with something tightly binding and covering her head and face.

None of these were positive developments, in Lee's opinion.

"You're awake," said a voice, weirdly modulated. It jumped around in pitch and timbre.

This interested Lee. "What's going on with your voice?" she asked.

There was a brief pause before the response. "That's not the first question we got from your two compatriots," the voice said. "They were more concerned with where they were and why they were being held."

"I'm sorry," Lee said. "I wasn't aware there was a protocol."

This got a chuckle. "My voice is being modulated because we know you have one of those computers in your head," the voice said. "And we know that if you're not recording me already, you will be at some point in time, and that you could use that to record and identify me. I would prefer that not to happen. For the same reason we've

blindfolded you, so you cannot record any visual things that would give us away. And of course we've also restrained you so that you stay put for now. We've taken your combat uniform because we know it provides you with strength and defense advantages, and we don't want you to have that. I do apologize for that."

"Do you," Lee said, as dryly as she could in the circumstance.

"Yes," the voice said. "Although you have no reason to believe me at the moment, you should understand that we have no interest in abusing you, either physically or sexually. Removing your combat uniform was a defensive procedure, nothing more."

"I'd believe you more if you hadn't slapped me awake," Lee said.

"You were surprisingly resistant to waking up," the voice said. "How do you feel?"

"I have a headache," Lee said. "My muscles are sore. I am dying of thirst. I have to pee. I am restrained. I'm blind. How are you?"

"Better than you, I will admit," the voice said. "Six, water."

What? Lee thought, and then there was something at her lips, a hard plastic nipple. Liquid came out of it; Lee drank it. It was water, so far as she could tell.

"Thank you," she said, after a minute. "Why did you say 'six'?"

"The person in the room with you is called Six," the voice said. "The number has no significance; it's randomly selected. We change them for every mission."

"What number are you?" Lee asked.

"This time I am Two," the voice said.

"And you're not in the room with me," Lee said.

"I am close by," Two said. "But I have no interest in having my own voice leak in so you can isolate it. So I listen and watch, and Six takes care of everything else."

"I still need to pee," Lee said.

"Six," Two said. Lee could hear Six move, and then suddenly a portion of the hard bottom of her chair disappeared. "Go ahead," Two said.

"You're kidding," Lee said.

"I'm afraid not," Two said. "Again, apologies. But you can't honestly expect me to unbind you. Even naked and blind, a Colonial Defense Forces soldier is a formidable opponent. There is a pan underneath your chair that will catch your waste. Six will then deal with it."

"I feel as if I should apologize to Six," Lee said. "Especially because eventually I will have to do something else than pee."

"This is not Six's first time doing this," Two said. "We're all professionals here."

"How reassuring," Lee said. Then she made an inward shrug and relieved herself. After she was finished, there was a scrape as a pan was removed and another scraping sound as the bottom of her chair was replaced. There were steps, followed by a door opening and then closing.

"Your compatriots told me that you are Lieutenant Heather Lee, of the Colonial Defense Forces ship *Tubingen,*" Two said.

"That's right," Lee said.

"Well, then, Lieutenant Lee, let me tell you how this is going to work," Two said. "You have been captured and you are my prisoner. I am going to ask you questions and you are going to answer them truthfully, as fully and completely as you can. If you do so, then when we are done I will have you released, obviously very far away from where we are now, but released all the same. If you do not do so, or if I catch you in a lie even once, I will kill you. I will not torture you, or abuse you, or have you raped or violated or any such nonsense. I will simply have a shotgun put to your head, in order to kill you, and to destroy that computer in your skull. It's old-fashioned but very effective. I regret to say that one of your compatriots, a Private Jefferson, already tested me on this score and learned to his misfortune that I am not joking. The lesson does him no good at this point, I'm afraid. But I hope his example might be useful to you."

Lee said nothing to this, thinking about Jefferson, who was always too enthusiastic for his own good.

The door opened; presumably Six was coming back into the room. "Six will now feed you and bathe you if you wish and will then leave. I have other matters to attend to for the next few hours. In that time, if you wish, you may consider what I've just told you. Do what we ask, and no harm will come to you. Do anything other than what we ask, and you will be dead. It's a binary choice. I hope you will choose wisely."

• • •

Left to herself, Lee reviewed her situation.

First: She knew who she was. Heather Lee, originally of Robeson County, North Carolina. Mother Sarah Oxendine, father Joseph Lee, sister Allie, brothers Joseph Jr. and Richard. In her past life a musician: a guitarist or cellist, depending on the gig. Joined up with the CDF six years previous, stationed with the *Tubingen* for the last two years six months. All this was important. If you were fuzzy on who you were, there were going to be other critical gaps in your knowledge base and you wouldn't know what they were.

Second: She knew where she was, in a general sense, and why she was there. She was on the planet of Zhong Guo. She and her company on the *Tubingen* were dispatched to quell a separatist rebellion in the provincial capital city of Zhoushan. The rebels had taken the local administration headquarters and broadcast media, securing hostages as they did so, and started airing screeds declaring Zhong Guo independent of the Colonial Union and seeking a new union with Earth, the "native and true home of humanity," as they put it. The local police had moved in to clear them out and were surprised when the rebels had more and better firepower than they did; the rebels killed two dozen police and took several more hostage, adding to their store of human shields.

The success of the rebels sparked a series of "Earth Rule" protests in other cities and towns including Liuzhau, Karhgar and Chifeng, the latter of which experienced severe property damage as rioters marched through the central business district, burning shops and buildings in an apparently indiscriminate fashion. By this time, the administration in the planetary capital of New Harbin had had enough and requested CDF intervention.

Lee and her platoon did a standard drop from high altitude at night with cloaking on; they were inside the administration and broadcast buildings before the rebels knew they had even landed on the roof. The fight was brief and lopsided; the rebels had only a few good fighters with them, the ones they had put out in front when the local police had gone at them. The rest of the rebels were recruited from the ranks of the young and excitable and had rather more enthusiasm than skill. The genuinely skilled rebel fighters engaged the CDF and were quickly subdued or killed, being no match for trained Colonial soldiers with superior physical and tactical skills; the rest surrendered without too much resistance.

Two rebel vehicles outside the administration offices opened fire at the building and were turned into glowing piles of slag by the *Tubingen,* which had targeted them from orbit. The hostages, kept in a basement-level wing filled with conference rooms, were dirty and tired but generally unharmed. The entire event took less than thirty minutes, with no casualties on the CDF side.

Their work done, the CDF soldiers asked for and received shore leave in Zhoushan, where they were welcomed enthusiastically, or so it seemed, by the locals, although that might have also been because the Colonial Union was known to pick up the tab for Colonial Defense Forces on shore leave, encouraging the soldiers to spend foolishly and the local shops and vendors to charge exorbitantly. If there were any rebel sympathizers among the burghers of Zhoushan, they kept their mouths shut and took the CDF's money.

The last thing Lee remembered prior to waking up in the room she was in now, she, Jefferson and Private Kiana Hughes were having dinner in a *hofbräuhaus* (Zhong Guo, despite its Chinese naming conventions, had mostly middle and southern Europeans, an irony that Lee, with Chinese ancestry on her father's side, found somewhat amusing). She recalled the three of them getting more than a little drunk, which in retrospect should have been a warning, since thanks to CDF soldiers' genetically-engineered physiology, it was almost impossible for them to actually get smashed. At the time, however, it just seemed like a pleasant buzz. She remembered piling out of the *hofbräuhaus* very late local time, wandering toward the hotel at which they had been booked and then nothing else until now.

Lee ruefully revised her assessment of the state of enthusiasm of the locals for the CDF's work. Clearly, not *everyone* was pleased.

Her memory checked out, and Lee turned her attention to where she might be now. Her BrainPal's internal chronometer told her that she had been out for roughly six hours. Given that expanse of time, it was possible that she, the apparently late Jefferson and (she rather strongly suspected) Hughes were now on the other side of the planet from Zhoushan. She doubted that, however. It would have taken at least some time for Two and Six to have gotten her naked and strapped to a chair and otherwise prepped for what they were planning to do to her. Two also mentioned that he (she? Lee decided to go with "he" in her brain for now) had already had enough time to talk to Jefferson and Hughes and to kill Jefferson when he had not cooperated. For these reasons, Lee suspected she was still somewhere in Zhoushan.

She also suspected, since she was still in fact in the hands of Two and Six and not already rescued by her platoon, that wherever she was had shielding that kept her BrainPal from transmitting her whereabouts. She tested this by trying to make a connection to Hughes and then to several other people in the platoon: nothing. She tried pinging the *Tubingen:* also nothing. Either this room specifically had a signal blocker or she was somewhere that was designed with (or had

among its capabilities) the ability to block signals. If it was the latter, that would bring down the number of possible buildings it could be in Zhoushan.

Lee thought again, more deeply, about her situation and realized she was sitting on a clue. She was in a restraint chair of some sort—moreover, a restraint chair designed for someone to sit in for an extended period of time, given that the seat of the chair had a sliding trapdoor to allow waste through. Lee did not fancy herself a connoisseur of restraint systems, but as she was now in her ninth decade of life, she had seen a thing or two. In her experience, restraint chairs showed up in three places: hospitals, prisons and particularly specialized brothels.

Of the three, Lee dismissed the idea of a brothel first. It was possible, but brothels were a place of business and not particularly secure. People lived in them and worked in them, and there were (if the brothel was at all successful) all sorts of new and different clientele coming in and going out at all times of the day. Brothels would ensure some privacy, but probably not so much that a shotgun blast wouldn't be noticed, not to mention a corpse or two being dragged out of the premises.

In a hospital a corpse would not be a problem, but the shotgun blasts probably would be. An abandoned hospital might solve that issue, but hospitals also generally were not signal-proof—too much medical information was shuttled about electronically to make it a feasible idea.

So, a prison or jail seemed to be the mostly likely location: chairs, signal-blocking structure and easy disposal of dead bodies, as the prison would likely have its own morgue. It also meant that whoever was holding her and Hughes also had the ability to discreetly bring people in and out of a prison setting: someone in the local police, or at least the local government.

Lee had been given a map of Zhoushan as part of the briefing for the mission; she called it up on her BrainPal and then winced slightly as

the computer in her head activated the visual cortex. Not actually seeing for several hours made even the illusion of light slightly painful. She let her brain acclimate to the visuals and then started scanning through.

As far as she could see (an expression that at the moment held some irony), there were two buildings in Zhoushan she was likely to be in: the municipal jail, which was in downtown Zhoushan and less than a kilometer away from the *hofbräuhaus* from which they were nabbed, and the province prison, which was ten klicks out from the Zhoushan city center. Lee had no detailed maps of either building—they had those only for the administration and broadcast buildings—but either way, she was comforted by at least the idea that she knew where she might be. It could come in handy.

She now turned her attention to her own situation, which she continued to deem not especially positive. The nakedness did not bother her on a personal level, as she'd never been particularly self-conscious about her body, but it did bother her that she was unarmored. Two had been correct that the CDF uniform gave its wearer certain protections and advantages, although its strengths in that regard were more passive than active. The uniform didn't make Lee stronger; it just made her tougher. Without it she would be more vulnerable to physical assault, which she suspected likely to happen despite assurances. Not to mention being vulnerable to shotgun blasts.

Speaking of which, she was also unarmed as well as unarmored. This was a problem, but one she spent little time concerning herself with. There was no point wishing for her weapons when she didn't have them.

The part where she was bound was also of concern to her. As discreetly as she could, she flexed against the binds. They felt soft, slick and supple rather than hard and unyielding, which told her that they were of some sort of woven substance rather than straight-up metal cuffs. She strained against the left arm restraint to see if there was any give to it, but there was none. The other restraints were the same. She

had all the genetically-engineered superstrength of a CDF soldier, but no leverage to apply it with. If the binds had even the slightest tear in them, she could work against that, but as far as she could tell, the binds were in excellent condition.

Finally, Lee took stock of her assets, which at the moment consisted of her brain and not much else: She had no eyes, no physical strength and no way to communicate to anyone except possibly to Two, which did her no good, and Six, which likewise did not give her much to go on. And as much as Lee thought she had a reasonably good brain, all things concerned, there was only so much it could do, trapped as it was in her head.

"Well, shit," she said aloud, listening to the sound of her voice travel around the room. The room was large enough and had walls made of a substance that made it acoustically bouncy, probably bare rock or concrete.

Hello, her brain said.

She spent the next half hour alone in her head, occasionally humming to herself. If Two was watching, it might confuse him a bit.

Eventually, the door to the room opened and Six (Lee presumed) came back in.

"Lieutenant Lee," said the voice of Two, "are you ready to begin?"

"I am ready to talk your ears off," Lee said.

• • •

For the next two hours, Lee spoke at length about any subject that Two wished to know about, which included current CDF troop strength and disposition, CDF and Colonial Union messaging about the break from Earth, what the two organizations were doing to compensate for the loss of human resources from Earth, the state of rebellions of various colonies, both in Lee's direct experience and from hearsay from other soldiers and Colonial Union staff and the details of Lee's particular mission on Zhong Guo.

Lee answered with facts when she could, informed guesses and estimates when she couldn't and wild supposition when she had to, making sure Two understood which was which and why, so there would be no margin for misunderstanding between the two of them.

"You are certainly being forthcoming," Two said at one point.

"I don't want a shotgun to the face," Lee said.

"I mean that you are offering rather more than your surviving compatriot," Two said.

"I'm the lieutenant," Lee said. "It's my job to know more than the soldiers under me. If I'm offering you more than Private Hughes, it's because I know more, not because she's holding out on you."

"Indeed," Two said. "That's good news for Private Hughes, then."

Lee smiled, knowing now that Hughes was the other soldier held and that for now, at least, she was still alive. "What else do you need to know?" she asked.

"At the moment, nothing," Two said. "But I will be back with more questions later. In the meantime, Six will tend to your needs. Thank you, Lieutenant Lee, for your cooperation."

"Delighted," Lee said. And with that, she assumed, Two had wandered away from his microphone to do whatever it is that he did, presumably talk to fellow conspirators (of which Lee assumed there were at least five).

She heard Six moving about in the room. "Do you mind if I talk?" Lee asked. "I know you can't answer. But I have to admit this entire incident is making me nervous." She began talking, primarily about her childhood, while Six fed her and gave her water and then tended to her bodily needs. After twenty minutes, Six went away and Lee shut up.

It was the room's acoustics that had given her the idea. Lee had spent years as a performing and recording musician, and part of her job was to make sure the room, whatever room she was in, wouldn't defeat her instrument or her band. She'd played enough basements with stone and concrete walls to know just how much the sound bouncing off the walls would mess with the performance and also what sorts of materials

made what sort of sonic response. She could close her eyes, strike a note in a room and tell you, roughly, how large the room was, what materials the room was made of and whether there were objects in the room bouncing sound off of them. She wasn't, alas, good enough at it to be able to make an entire map of a room that way.

But her BrainPal was.

For two and a half hours Lee had talked, almost constantly, moving her head as much as she could, risking a neck chafe from her restraining strap. As she talked, her BrainPal took the data from her voice (and from Two's) and used it to paint a picture of the room, marking every surface that sound reflected off of, polling the delay between the ears to locate the surface in the room and adding each additional piece of data to give a complete audio portrait of the room, of Six and of everything within earshot.

What Lee had learned:

One, that Two was (or, more accurately, was speaking to her through) a PDA set up on a table a meter and a half away, directly in front of her. This was the same table on which Six kept the bottles from which she fed Lee soup and water.

Two, Six was a woman, about 165 centimeters tall and weighing about fifty-five kilos. When Lee was talking directly into her face, she got a reasonably good "look" at Six; she guessed Six was roughly forty to fifty years of age, presuming she was not ever in the CDF.

Three, to the side of the chair was another table, less than a meter away, on which sat a shotgun and various surgical, cutting and shearing implements. Which confirmed for Lee that Two was full of shit about the torture assurances, and that she wasn't likely to get out of the room alive—nor was Hughes going to get out of hers.

What Lee suspected: Six would return at some point, Two would declare regretfully that they would have to go over answers again, this time with some added incentive in the form of pain, and then at the end of it she would be fed the shotgun while Two and his friends reviewed any discrepancies in her stories and the stories they got from Hughes.

Which meant Lee had an indeterminate but short amount of time to escape the chair, rescue Hughes and escape from wherever they were.

She had no idea how she was going to do that.

"Come on," she said to herself, and thumped the back of her head against the headrest as much as she could with the restraint on her neck. It wasn't a whole lot, but it was enough to clack her jaw, driving her left incisors into the edge of her tongue. There was a small nip of pain and then the odd, not-at-all-coppery taste of SmartBlood, oozing out from the wound.

Lee grimaced. She could never get used to the taste of SmartBlood. It was the stuff the CDF used to replace human blood in its soldiers for its superior oxygen-handling capabilities; the nanobiotic machines could hold several times more oxygen than red blood cells could. It meant that a CDF soldier could survive without taking a breath far longer than a normal human could. It also meant that SmartBlood could become so superoxygenated that a favorite party trick of CDF soldiers was forcing the nanobots in the SmartBlood, which could be programmed via BrainPal, to incinerate themselves in a flash. It was a surprisingly excellent way to get rid of bloodsucking insects: Let them feed off your flesh and then, as they fly away, ignite the SmartBlood in their bodies.

If only Six were a vampire, Lee thought. *I'd show her*. She spat the SmartBlood that had accumulated in her mouth and did a poor job of it, spattering it onto her right wrist and the restraint over it.

Hello, her brain said again.

As it did so, the door opened. Lee opened up a visual window of the room and started tracking the new sounds and their reflections on them. In a few seconds, Six came into view, positioning herself between the chair Lee was restrained in and the table holding the shotgun and surgical implements. Lee "watched" Six almost disappear as she stopped moving and her sounds ceased except for her breathing and then became silhouetted again when Two spoke from the PDA.

“I’m afraid I have some very bad news, Lieutenant Lee,” Two said. “I took the information you gave me back to my colleagues, and as impressed as they were with your willingness to share, that same willingness has made them suspicious. They believe a CDF soldier would never willingly volunteer the information you have, or as much information as you have. They suspect that while you are telling some of the truth, you may not be telling all of the truth.”

“I told you everything I know,” Lee said, putting an edge of panic in her voice.

“I know you have,” Two said. “And I for one believe you. It’s why you’re still alive, Lieutenant. But my colleagues are skeptical. I asked them what it would take to relieve them of their skepticism. They suggested we go through the questions again, but this time with a certain added … urgency.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Lee said.

“I do apologize,” Two said. “I told you that we would not torture you. At the time, I thought it was the truth. I regret it is no longer the case.”

Lee said nothing to this. She knew by all outward indications it would look as if she were trying to keep from crying.

“Six is a medical practitioner of some note,” Two said. “I can promise you that you will be inflicted with only as much pain as is necessary and not a single bit more. Six, you may begin.”

Lee opened her mouth just slightly to offer what she hoped would sound like a frightened, keening wail.

Six reached over to the table, picked up a scalpel and moved it toward Lee’s right ring finger, slipping the very edge of it underneath the fingernail.

Lee, who had bit her tongue quite severely for several seconds, spat a gout of SmartBlood at Six, covering her arm and the hand wielding the scalpel. In the reflection of the spitting noise she saw Six’s chin move sharply, as if she had moved her head to look at Lee quizzically.

"You're going to make some noise now, Six," Lee said, and ordered all the SmartBlood she'd spit out to ignite as furiously as it could.

Six became a bright spot of noise as she jerked back, wailing, arm and hand incinerating. She wheeled in reverse, colliding with the desk that held Two's PDA. It dislodged from its position and fell forward, leaving Two in the dark about what came next.

Lee wailed as well as the bit of SmartBlood that had landed on her wrist burned like hell against her skin. Then she gritted her teeth and as hard as she could started yanking against her right wrist restraint, currently being weakened by the SmartBlood burning into its fibers.

One yank, two yanks, three yanks … four. There was a ripping sound, and Lee's right arm was free. Without bothering to put out her wrist or uncover her eyes, she reached over to the table and grabbed the shears and as quickly as possible started cutting her other restraints: left wrist, neck, waist and ankles.

It was when she got to her ankles that Six exclaimed through her pain; Lee guessed that Six had finally figured out what Lee was up to and scrambled toward the table with the shotgun on it. Lee cut through the final restraint and leaped for the table, too late; Six had the shotgun.

Lee yelled, grabbed the scalpel Six had dropped and pushed up, getting inside the radius of the shotgun and driving the scalpel up Six's abdomen. Six made a surprised gasping sound at the sharp, slicing pain, dropped the shotgun and slid to the ground.

Lee finally removed her blindfold, turned off the audio map and blinked down at Six, who was looking at her with something akin to wonder. She was, Lee noted, a bloody mess.

"How did you do that?" Six whispered between panting breaths of agony.

"I have good ears," Lee said.

Six had nothing to say to that or anything else.

Lee grabbed the shotgun, checked the load and then moved quickly to position herself by the door. Less than twenty seconds later, the door burst open and a man came through, sidearm at the ready. Lee dropped

him with a shot in the abdomen and then pivoted to get a second man in the doorway square in the chest. She dropped the spent shotgun, picked up the sidearm, checked the clip and went through the door.

There was a hallway with another doorway five meters down. Lee grabbed the second dead man, dragged him down the hallway with her, kicked open the door and hurled the corpse through. She waited until the second shotgun report and then shot the man still holding the shotgun. He went down. Lee resighted and aimed at the PDA sitting on a table, blowing it to pieces. She went into the room and looked at the chair to find Hughes, naked, restrained and understandably anxious.

"Private Hughes," she said. "How are you?"

"Ready to get the *fuck* out of this chair, Lieutenant," Hughes said.

Lee reached over to the table that held surgical instruments and then cut through Hughes's bonds. Hughes pulled the blindfold over her head and looked at her naked lieutenant, blinking.

"This was not what I was expecting the first thing I would see to be," Hughes said, to Lee.

"Knock it off," Lee said, and pointed toward the corpse of the man she'd flung through the door. "Check him for a sidearm and let's get out of here."

"Yes, ma'am," Hughes said, and moved to the corpse.

"What did this one call himself?" Lee said, pointing to the man who held the shotgun.

"One," Hughes said. "But he never called himself it. I didn't even know he was a he until right now. Someone calling himself Two called him that." She found the sidearm, checked its load.

"Right," Lee said. "I killed three more, including that one and one called Six. So that's four dead and at least two still alive."

"Are we going to wait around to meet them?" Hughes asked. "Because I'd prefer not."

"We agree," Lee said. "Come on." They went to the door; Hughes took point. The two of them made their way back down the hall, toward the direction Lee had come from. Another door lay five meters

past the door of her room; they opened it and found it empty except for a chair and a spray of gray matter and fluid on the bar floor.

"Jefferson," Lee said. Hughes nodded, unhappy, and they continued onward.

A final door stood near a stairwell. The two banged through and found a small office with a PDA on a desk and very little else.

"This was Two's room," Lee said.

"Where did the son of a bitch get to?" Hughes asked

"I think I scared him off when I set a friend of his on fire," Lee said. She picked up the PDA. "Watch the door," she said to Hughes.

On the PDA were a series of video files of Lee, Hughes and Jefferson as well as other documents Lee didn't bother with. She swiped past all of them to look for the PDA's file system for a specific program. "Here it is," she said, and pressed the button that appeared on the screen.

Lee's BrainPal suddenly came alive with a long queue of increasingly urgent messages from her sergeant, her captain and the *Tubingen* itself.

Hughes, who apparently received a similar queue of urgent messages, smiled. "Nice to know we were missed."

"Make sure they know where we are," Lee said. "And make sure that if I tell them to, they'll flatten this place into the ground."

"You got it, ma'am," Hughes said.

The two of them moved out of the office and went up the stairs, Lee taking the PDA with her and tucking it under an arm. The stairs emptied out into another short corridor that looked like a wing of a hotel. The two soldiers stalked through it carefully, turned a dogleg and were confronted by a closed door. Lee nodded to Hughes, who opened it and pushed through.

They came through the side of a lobby filled with lumpy-looking older people in ordinary clothing and very attractive younger people wearing almost nothing at all.

"Where the hell are we?" Hughes said.

Lee laughed. “Holy shit,” she said. “It *was* a brothel!”

The lobby quieted as the brothel workers and their potential clients got a look at Lee and Hughes.

“*What?*” Hughes said, finally, not dropping her weapon. “You all act like you’ve never seen a naked woman before.”

• • •

“I don’t think I can tell this story again any differently than I’ve already told it the last three times, ma’am,” Lee said, to Colonel Liz Egan. Egan, as she understood it, was some sort of liaison for the State Department, which had taken considerable interest in her abduction and escape.

“I just need to know if there’s any additional detail you can give me regarding this Two person,” Egan said.

“No, ma’am,” Lee said. “I never saw him or heard him except as a heavily treated voice over that PDA. You have all the files I made, and you have all the files on the PDA I took. There really is nothing else I can tell you about him.”

“Her,” Egan said.

“Beg pardon, ma’am?” Lee said.

“Her,” Egan said. “We’re pretty sure Two was Elyssia Gorham, the manager of the Lotus Flower, that brothel you found yourselves in. The office you found the PDA in was hers, and she would be able to keep anyone out of the basement level you were in. The rooms the three of you were held in were private function rooms for clients who either liked rougher pleasures or wanted special event rooms which would be built up and torn down quickly. That also explains the signal blockers. The sort of people who would rent those rooms would want to be assured of their privacy. In all it made it a perfect place to stash the three of you.”

“Do we know who drugged us in the first place?” Lee asked.

“We tracked it down to the bartender at the *hofbräuhaus,*” Egan said. “He said he was offered a month’s salary to drop the drugs in your

drink. He needed the money, apparently. It's a good thing he has it, since now he's been fired."

"I didn't think we could be drugged," Lee said. "That's supposed to be one of the benefits of SmartBlood."

"You can't be drugged with anything biological," Egan said. "Whatever you were drugged with was designed with SmartBlood in mind. It's something we'll be needing to look out for in the future. It's already been noted to CDF Research and Development."

"Good," Lee said.

"On the subject of SmartBlood, that was some good thinking on your part to incapacitate your captor," Egan said. "The idea to map your surroundings with sound is also clear thinking. You've been recommended for commendation for both actions. No promotion, sorry."

"Thank you, but I'm not really concerned about a commendation or a promotion," Lee said. "I want to know more about the people who killed Jefferson. When they were interrogating me, they were asking me a lot of questions about what I knew about separatist movements and groups wanting to align their colonies with the Earth instead of the Colonial Union. I don't know anything about that, but it got one of my people killed. I want to know more."

"There's nothing really to say," Egan said. "These are strange times for the Colonial Union. We're busy trying to bring the Earth back into the fold, and in the meantime our colonies are trying to deal with events as best as they can. There's no organized separatist movement, and the Earth isn't actively trying to recruit any colonies. As far as we can tell, these all are the works of isolated groups. The one here on Zhong Guo was just a bit more organized."

"Ah," Lee said. She knew when she was being lied to, but she also knew when not to say anything about it.

Egan stood, Lee rising to follow her. "In any event, Lieutenant, it's nothing I want you to worry about right now. Your commendation comes with two weeks of shore leave at your leisure. May I suggest you

take it someplace other than Zhong Guo. And that you stay out of *hofbräuhauses* for the time being."

"Yes, ma'am," Lee said. "Good advice." She saluted and watched Egan walk away. Then she closed her eyes and listened to the sound of the ship around her.

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EPISODE NINE

The Observers

"Lieutenant Wilson," Ambassador Ode Abumwe said. "Come in. Sit down, please."

Harry Wilson entered Abumwe's stateroom on the new *Clarke,* which was even smaller and less comfortable than it had been on their previous spaceship. "This is cozy," he said, as he sat.

"If by 'cozy' you mean 'almost insultingly cramped,' then yes, that's exactly what it is," Abumwe said. "If you actually meant 'cozy,' then you should have better standards of personal comfort."

"I did in fact mean the first of those," Wilson assured her.

"Yes, well," Abumwe said. "When you have your spaceship shot out from under you and your replacement starship is half a century old and put together with baling wire and gum, you make do with what you have." She motioned to her walls. "Captain Coloma tells me that this is actually one of the more spacious personal quarters on the ship. Larger than hers, even. I don't know if that's true."

"I have an officer's berth," Wilson said. "I think it's about a third of the size of this stateroom. I can turn around in it, but I can't extend both of my arms out in opposite directions. Hart's is even smaller and he's got a roommate. They're either going to kill each other or start sleeping together simply as a defensive maneuver."

"It's a good thing Mr. Schmidt is using his vacation time, then," Abumwe said.

"It is," Wilson agreed. "He told me he planned to spend it in a hotel room, by himself for a change."

"The romance of the diplomatic life, Lieutenant Wilson," Abumwe said.

"We are living the dream, ma'am," Wilson said.

Abumwe stared at Wilson for a moment, as if she were slightly disbelieving the two of them had actually just made a commiserating joke together. Wilson wouldn't have blamed her if she was. The two of them had not really gotten along for nearly all the time he had been assigned to her mission group. She was acerbic and forbidding; he was sarcastic and aggravating; and both of them were aware that in the larger scheme of things they were hanging on to the bottom rung of the diplomatic ladder. But the last several weeks had been odd times for everyone. If the two of them still weren't what you could call friendly, at the very least they realized that circumstances had put them both on the same side, against most of the rest of the universe.

"Tell me, Wilson, do you remember the time when you reminded me we had something in common?" Abumwe asked the lieutenant.

Wilson frowned, trying to remember. "Sure," he said, after a minute. "We're both from Earth."

Abumwe nodded. "Right," she said. "You lived there for seventy-five years before joining the Colonial Defense Forces. I emigrated when I was a child."

"I seem to recall you not being particularly pleased that I reminded you of the connection," Wilson said.

Abumwe shrugged. "You made the connection right as the Earth and the Colonial Union had their falling-out," she said. "I thought you were making some sort of implication."

"I wasn't trying to recruit you, I swear," Wilson said, risking a little levity.

"I wasn't under the impression you were," Abumwe said. "I simply thought you were making a joke in terrible taste."

"Ah," Wilson said. "Got it."

"But as it turns out, this shared connection has landed us an unusual assignment," Abumwe said. She picked up her PDA, activated it and

pressed at the screen. An instant later, Wilson's BrainPal pinged and a note popped up in his field of vision; Abumwe had sent him a file.

Wilson unpacked and quickly scanned the file, closing his eyes to focus. After a minute, he smiled. "The Earthlings are coming," he said.

"That's right," Abumwe said. "The Colonial Union is worried that the Earth still has a lack of confidence in the transparency of our dealings with it. It's worried that the Earth will eventually decide to go it alone, or even worse, start negotiations with the Conclave to join its ranks. So as a gesture of goodwill, it's going to allow a party of observers unimpeded access to one of its current set of diplomatic negotiations. They've selected our upcoming trade talks with the Burfinor. I am told that the secretary herself believes that my personal connection with the Earth—and the connection of my staff, meaning *you*—will have a meaningful positive impact on the relationship between the Colonial Union and the Earth."

"And you believe that line?" Wilson said, opening his eyes.

"Of course not," Abumwe said. "We were picked because our negotiations with the Burfinor are inconsequential. It looks good because we're trading for the Burfinor's biomedical technology, which will be impressive if you've never seen something like it before, and the Earth people haven't. But it's not something that's particularly sensitive. So it doesn't matter if the Earth people watch what we do. The bit about you and me having a history with Earth is just show."

"Do we know if these people are *actually* from Earth?" Wilson asked. "Captain Coloma and I had a run-in with fake Earthlings not too long ago. The CDF was passing off former soldiers as representatives from Earth in order to find a spy. We've gotten played before, ma'am. We need to know whether we're being played again, and if so, what for."

Abumwe smiled, which was a rare enough thing that Wilson took special note of it. "You and I had the same thought on this, which is why I ran this past some of my own people at Phoenix Station," she said. "Everything I can see about these people checks out. But then

again I don't have the same familiarity with Earth that you do, so there might be something I'm missing. You have the entire file on all five members of the observer mission. Go through it and let me know if something stands out for you."

"Got it," Wilson said. "Might as well let my personal history actually work for us."

"Yes," Abumwe said. "And another thing, Wilson. You left Earth only a decade ago. You're still close enough to how people from Earth think and do things that you can give us insight into their state of mind regarding the Colonial Union and their relationship to us."

"Well, that depends," Wilson said. "I'm from the United States. If the observers are from elsewhere, I'm not going to be any more useful than anyone else."

"One of them is, I think," Abumwe said. "It's in the files. Go ahead and see. If there is, then make friends with that one."

"All right," Wilson said. "This is the part where I officially note to you that I am supposed to be doing other work for you on this mission, specifically examining the equipment the Burfinor are giving us."

"Of course," Abumwe said, slightly irritated. "Do your actual job, and do this. In fact, combine the two and invite one of the observers to help you run your tests. We will score additional transparency points for that. All the while you'll be learning things from them."

"Spying on them," Wilson said.

"I prefer the term 'observing,'" Abumwe said. "After all, they will be observing *us*. There's no reason not to return the favor."

• • •

The humans from Earth constituted a carefully selected group, the members chosen to represent the entire planet, not only a single continent or political group or interest. From Europe, there was Franz Meyer, an economist and author. South America yielded Luiza Carvalho, a lawyer and diplomat. From Africa, Thierry Bourkou, an

engineer. North America offered Danielle Lowen, a doctor. Asia presented Liu Cong, a diplomat who was the head of the observer mission.

Ambassador Abumwe welcomed them warmly to the *Clarke,* introduced Captain Coloma and Executive Officer Neva Balla and made introductions of her own staff. Wilson was introduced last of all, as the liaison between the observer mission and Abumwe. "Whatever you want or whatever questions you have, Wilson is here for you," Abumwe said.

Wilson nodded and shook hands with Liu and, as agreed to by Abumwe, addressed him in standard Chinese. "Welcome to our ship, and I look forward to assisting you however I may," he said, to the diplomat.

Liu smiled, glanced over to Abumwe and then turned his attention back to Wilson. "Thank you, Lieutenant," he said. "I was not made aware that you spoke anything other than English."

Wilson waited for his BrainPal to translate and then thought up a response; his BrainPal translated it and gave him the pronunciation, which he then attempted. "I don't," he said. "The computer in my head is able to translate what you say and offers me a response in the same language. So you may talk to me in whatever language you like. However, I ask that you let me respond in English, because I am sure I am mangling your language right now."

Liu laughed. "Indeed you are," he said, in unaccented English. "Your pronunciation is terrible. But I appreciate the effort. Can you do the same trick for my colleagues?"

Wilson could and did, conversing briefly in Brazilian Portuguese, Arabic and German before bringing his attention to Lowen.

"I don't believe I need to do the translation trick with you," he said to her.

"Répétez, s'il vous plaît?" Lowen said.

"Uh," Wilson said, and scrambled to respond in French.

"No, no, I'm just messing with you," Lowen said, quickly. "I'm from Colorado."

"We've known each other thirty seconds and already I can tell you're difficult, Ms. Lowen," Wilson said, testing.

"I prefer to think of it as challenging, Lieutenant Wilson," Lowen said. "I assumed you'd be able to handle it."

"I don't mind," Wilson assured her.

"You sound midwesterny to me," Lowen said. "Maybe Ohio?"

"Indiana," Wilson said.

"Did you hear about the Cubs?" Lowen said.

Wilson smiled. "I heard something about that, yes."

"They finally won a World Series and the world did not end," Lowen said. "All those prophecies, shot to hell."

"Disappointing, really," Wilson said.

"Not to me," Lowen said. "The Earth is where I keep all my stuff."

"You and Lieutenant Wilson seem to get along, Doctor Lowen," Liu said, watching the exchange between the two.

"We seem to speak each other's language, yes," Lowen said.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind being our point person with the lieutenant," Liu said. "It would be easier to route all our requests for him through a single person."

"If you like, Ambassador Liu," Lowen said, and turned back to Wilson. "That work for you, Lieutenant?"

"Will you submit all your requests in French?" Wilson asked.

"If you really have a hankering to experience my genuinely atrocious high school French any more than you already have, then, sure," Lowen said.

"Then we have a deal," Wilson said.

"Merveilleux," Lowen said.

Wilson glanced over to Abumwe, whose expression was caught between amusement and annoyance. *Well, you wanted me to make friends with the American,* Wilson thought.

• • •

The negotiations with the Burfinor did not go well.

"We regret to inform you that our minister in charge of trade has said that the initial conditions for our negotiation are, in her mind, too unfavorable toward us," said Blbllllblblb Doodoodo, whose first name was most accurately pronounced by humans by rapidly moving their finger back and forth on their lips and then crooning the second half.

"That is indeed regrettable," Abumwe said. Wilson, who was in the back of the conference room, ready to give a report that he now suspected he would not give, could see the set in Abumwe's jaw that signaled her irritation at this unexpected speed bump, but he did not imagine it was noticeable to anyone who hadn't been with her for some time. At the very least, none of the observers from Earth seemed to notice. They seemed far more engaged in Doodoodo. Wilson reminded himself that the Earthlings were still new to spending time in the company of alien species; the Burfinor might be the first intelligent non-humans that any of them had ever seen in person. "Could you give us some further context to explain this change in opinion?" Abumwe asked.

"There is no doubt that the Colonial Union will benefit from the biomedical scanners we have offered to you," Doodoodo said.

"Wilson?" Abumwe said, not looking at him.

"I've run the preliminary diagnostics on the machine we were given for review," Wilson said. "It performed as advertised, at least for the time I had to work with it, which means it has an order of magnitude higher diagnostic ability than our own bioscanners. I'd want to spend more time with it, and I haven't gotten to the other items we're negotiating for. But in a general sense, the scanners do what they say, say what they do."

"Precisely," said Doodoodo. "These are of immense value to your colonies."

"And so are our spaceships to yours," Abumwe pointed out. The Colonial Union was hoping to sell five recently-retired frigates to the Burfinor in exchange for several hundred of the scanners.

"But there is a fundamental mismatch in the technologies, is there not?" Doodoodo said. "The technology we are offering you is state of the biomedical art; what you are offering us is a generation or more behind your latest ships."

"The technology is robust," Abumwe insisted. "I would remind you that we arrived here in a ship that is several generations older than the ships we are offering you. It's still spaceworthy and in fine repair."

"Yes, of course," Doodoodo said. "We're well aware how the *Clarke* is intended to be an advertisement for selling us these discounted goods. Nevertheless, the minister feels that the imbalance is too great. We seek a renegotiation."

"These are initial terms that your minister originally sought out," Abumwe said. "To make these changes now is highly unusual."

Doodoodo tugged at the base of his eyestalks, gently. "I believe the minister is of the opinion that circumstances have changed." One of Doodoodo's eyes, possibly unconsciously, swiveled to take in the Earthling observers.

Abumwe did not fail to catch the implication but could do nothing about it in the moment. Instead she pressed forward, hoping to have Doodoodo go back to his boss with a request to reconsider her change in the negotiations. Doodoodo was exceedingly pleasant and sympathetic to his human counterpart but promised nothing.

During all this, Liu and his Earth counterparts said nothing and gave no indication of whatever they might be thinking. Wilson tried to catch Lowen's eye for an indication of her thoughts, but she kept her focus forward, at Doodoodo.

Negotiations for the day ended shortly thereafter, and the humans, frustrated, rode the shuttle back to the *Clarke* in silence, and dispersed from the shuttle bay equally quiet. Wilson watched Abumwe stalk off, followed by her assistant. The other members of Abumwe's staff on the

shuttle milled about uncertainly for a moment before heading out themselves. In a corner of the bay, the Earth contingent huddled together for a moment, talking; at one point, Lowen popped her head up and looked in Wilson's direction. Wilson tried not to read anything into it.

Eventually, the Earth cluster broke up and Liu and Lowen walked directly toward Wilson.

"Greetings, Earthlings," Wilson said.

Liu looked politely puzzled; Lowen smiled. "How long have you been waiting to use that?" she asked.

"For at least a dozen years," Wilson said.

"Was it everything you wanted it to be?" Lowen asked.

"It really was," Wilson said.

"It was an interesting trade session you had today," Liu said, diplomatically.

"That's one way of putting it, yes," Wilson said.

"So what happened back there?" Lowen said.

"You mean, why did a routine trade agreement fly off the rails, embarrassing the Colonial Union in front of the observers whom it wanted to impress with its diplomatic acumen?" Wilson said. He noted Liu's expression to his summation of the day's events, discreet though it was.

"Yes, that would be the event to which I was referring," Lowen said.

"The answer is implicit in the question," Wilson said. "You were there. The Burfinor know something of the Colonial Union's predicament with Earth. I suppose they figured that we would be motivated to make a deal of any sort in order not to embarrass ourselves in front of you."

"It didn't work," Lowen said.

"Yes, well," Wilson said. "The Burfinor don't know Ambassador Abumwe very well. She's persistent, and she doesn't like surprises."

"What will happen now?" Liu asked.

"I expect that Ambassador Abumwe will go back tomorrow, inform Doodoodo that any new terms are entirely unacceptable and as politely as possible threaten to walk out of the negotiations," Wilson said. "At which point our Burfinor friend is likely to walk back the request for new terms, because while it would be nice for the Colonial Union to get our hands on some sweet new biomedical scanners, the Burfinor have a low-grade border war simmering with the Eroj and are running low on ships. So they need this trade agreement more than we do, and if it fails, they lose more."

"Interesting," Liu said again.

"We didn't want you to be bored," Wilson said.

"You also didn't want us to see a diplomatic negotiation where the Colonial Union would be at an actual disadvantage," Lowen said, looking directly at Wilson.

"And you're surprised by this?" Wilson asked, looking at both Liu and Lowen equally.

"No," Liu said. "Although I'll admit to being mildly surprised that you admit it."

Wilson shrugged. "I'm a glorified tech support, not a trained diplomat," he said. "I'm allowed to say obvious things."

"Your boss might not be happy with you saying 'obvious things' to us," Lowen noted.

Liu opened his mouth before Wilson did. "On the contrary, I think Ambassador Abumwe knew exactly what she was doing when she assigned Lieutenant Wilson as our liaison," he said.

"She's the opposite of stupid," Wilson agreed.

"So I am learning," Liu said, and then yawned. "I'm sorry," he said. "Space travel is still new to me and I've discovered that it wears me out. I believe I will get some rest."

"How are you finding your quarters?" Wilson asked.

"They're cozy," Liu said.

"What a diplomatic way of putting that," Wilson said.

Liu laughed. "Yes, well. That's *my* job," he said. He excused himself and exited.

"Nice fellow," Wilson said, as he left.

"An excellent fellow," Lowen said. "One of the best diplomats in the world, and one of the nicest people you'd want to meet. He even gave up his private berth for Franz to use and roomed with Thierry. Franz got a bit claustrophobic. Said he'd seen prison cells that were larger."

"It's probably true," Wilson said.

"The irony is that the person who is going to suffer most for it is Thierry," Lowen said. "Liu is brilliant and wonderful, but he also snores like a freight train. Thierry's got to suffer through that now. Don't be surprised if for the next few days you see him look very, very tired."

"You could prescribe him something to get to sleep," Wilson said. "You're a doctor, after all."

"I don't think my scripting privileges extend past Neptune," Lowen said. "And anyway, Franz travels with a white noise generator to help him get to sleep. He's already given it to Thierry for the duration. He should be fine. *Should* be."

"Good," Wilson said. "And you? How are your quarters?"

"They suck," Lowen said. "And Luiza already claimed the bottom bunk."

"It's a hard life you lead," Wilson said.

"If people only knew," Lowen said. "Speaking of which, who do I have to kill to get a drink around here?"

"Fortunately, no one," Wilson said. "There's an officers lounge three decks down. It offers a regrettable selection of terrible light beers and inferior spirits."

"I can fix that," Lowen said. "I travel with a bottle of eighteen-year-old Laphroaig in my case."

"That's not necessarily healthy," Wilson said.

"Relax," Lowen said. "If I were genuinely an alcoholic, I'd take along something much cheaper. I brought it on the off chance I might have to butter up one of you folks and pretend to be friendly and such."

"Thank God you didn't have to do *that,*" Wilson said.

"Before we arrived, I thought I might ask Ambassador Abumwe if she'd like a drink," Lowen said. "But I don't really get the sense she's the sort to appreciate a good buttering up."

"I think you've accurately assessed the ambassador," Wilson said.

"You, on the other hand," Lowen said, pointing at Wilson.

"I am all about the buttering, Dr. Lowen," Wilson assured her.

"Wonderful," Lowen said. "First stop, the crawl space you folks laughingly call officers berths on this ship. Second stop, officers lounge. Hopefully, it is larger."

• • •

The officers lounge was larger, but not by much.

"Does the Colonial Union have something against personal space?" Lowen asked, hoisting the Laphroaig onto the very small table. The officers lounge was empty, except for Lowen, Wilson and the Laphroaig.

"It's an old ship," Wilson explained while selecting a pair of cups from the lounge's cupboard. "In the old days, people were smaller and appreciated a good snuggle."

"I am suspicious of the veracity of your statement," Lowen said.

"That's probably wise," Wilson said. He came over to the table and set down the cups. They made a *click* as they connected with the table.

Lowen, puzzled, reached for one of the cups. "Magnetic," she said, lifting the cup.

"Yes," Wilson said. "The artificial gravity doesn't frequently cut out, but when it does it's nice not to have cups floating about randomly."

"What about the stuff in the cups?" Lowen asked. "What happens to that?"

"It gets slurped frantically," Wilson said, picking up his own cup and waggling it in front of Lowen. Lowen eyed Wilson sardonically, opened the Laphroaig, tipped in a finger and a half and gave herself an equal amount. "To artificial gravity," she said, in a toast.

"To artificial gravity," Wilson said.

They drank.

• • •

Drink two, some minutes later:

"So, is it easy?" Lowen said.

"Is what easy?" Wilson asked.

Lowen waved at Wilson's body. "Being green."

"I can't believe you just went there," Wilson said.

"I know," Lowen said. "Jim Henson and several generations of his descendants are now rolling in their graves, many dozens of light-years away."

"It *is* a funny joke," Wilson said. "Or at least was, the first six hundred times I heard it."

"It's a serious question, though!" Lowen said. "I'm asking from a place of medical curiosity, you know. I want to know if all those so-called improvements they give you Colonial Defense Forces soldiers are actually all that."

"Well, start with this," Wilson said. "How old do I look to you?"

Lowen looked. "I don't know, maybe twenty-two? Twenty-five, tops? You being green messes with my age sense. A lot younger than me, and I'm thirty-five. But you're not younger than me, are you?"

"I'm ninety," Wilson said.

"Get out," Lowen said.

"More or less," Wilson said. "You're out here long enough and you eventually lose track unless you check. It's because as long as you're CDF, you don't actually age."

"How is that even possible?" Lowen said. "Entropy still works out here, right? Physics hasn't totally broken down?"

Wilson extended an arm. "You're engaging in the pathetic fallacy," he said. "Just because I look like a human being doesn't mean I am. This body has more genetic material that's not strictly human than it does material that is human. And it heavily integrates machines as well. My blood is actually a bunch of nanobots in a fluid. I am and every other CDF soldier is a genetically-modified cyborg."

"But you're still *you,* right?" Lowen asked. "You're still the same *person* you were when you left Earth. Still the same consciousness."

"That's a question of some contention among us soldiers," Wilson said, setting his arm back down. "When you transfer over to the new body, the machine that does the transfer makes it at least seem like for an instant you're in two bodies at once. It *feels* like you as a person make the transfer. But I think it's equally possible that what happens is that memories are transferred over to a brain specially prepared for them, it wakes up, and there's just enough cross talk between the two separate brains to give the *illusion* of a transfer before the old one shuts down."

"In which case, you're actually dead," Lowen said. "The *real* you. And this you is a fake."

"Right." Wilson took another sip of his drink. "Mind you, the CDF could show you graphs and charts that show that actual consciousness transfer happens. But I think this is one of those things you can't *really* model from the outside. I have to accept the possibility that I could be a fake Harry Wilson."

"And this doesn't bother you," Lowen said.

"In a metaphysical sense, sure," Wilson said. "But in a day-to-day sense, I don't think about it much. On the inside, it sure *feels* like I've been around for ninety years, and ultimately this version of me likes being alive. So."

"Wow, this conversation went places I wasn't expecting it to go," Lowen said.

"If you think that's weird, wait until I tell you that thanks to the mechanics of the skip drive, you're in an entirely different universe and will never see your friends and family again," Wilson said.

"Wait, what?" Lowen said.

Wilson motioned to the Laphroaig bottle. "Better pour yourself another drink," he said.

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Drink four, sometime later:

"You know what the Colonial Union's problem is, don't you?" Lowen asked.

"There's just one problem?" Wilson responded.

"It's arrogance!" Lowen said, ignoring Wilson's question. "What sort of government decides that the smart thing to do, the prudent thing to do, the *wise* thing to do, is to keep an entire planet in an arrested state of development, just to use it to farm colonists and soldiers?"

"If you're expecting me to act as defense for the Colonial Union's practices, it's going to be a very short debate," Wilson said.

"And not just any planet," Lowen said, ignoring Wilson again. Wilson smiled; clearly Lowen was self-winding when she was tipsy. "But Earth! I mean, seriously, are you fucking kidding me? The cradle of human life in the universe, the place from which we all spring, our home planet, for crying out loud. And a couple hundred years ago some pricks on Phoenix thought, Hey, screw them. Honestly, what did you *think* was going to happen when we found out how badly you've been messing with us? And for how long?"

"I reiterate my comment that if you're expecting me to defend the Colonial Union, you're going to be sorely disappointed," Wilson said.

"But you're one of them!" Lowen said. "You know how they think, at least, right? So what were they thinking?"

"I think they were thinking that they would never have to deal with the Earth finding out anything," Wilson said. "And for the sake of

accuracy, the Colonial Union *did* do a very fine job of keeping the Earth in the dark for a couple of centuries. If it hadn't tried to kill off a friend of mine, and his entire family, *and* his colony, for the purposes of political expediency, they'd probably still be getting away with it."

"Hold on," Lowen said. "You know John Perry?"

"We left Earth on the same boat," Wilson said. "We were part of the same group of friends. We called ourselves the Old Farts. There were seven of us then. There's three of us now. Me, John and Jesse Gonzales."

"Where is she?" Lowen asked.

"She's on the colony of Erie," Wilson said. "She and I were together for a while, but she eventually wanted to leave the CDF and I didn't. She married a guy on Erie and has twin daughters now. She's happy."

"But all the rest are dead," Lowen said.

"They told us when we joined that three-quarters of us would be dead in ten years," Wilson said. He was lost in thought for a moment, then looked up at Lowen and smiled. "So strictly on a percentage basis, the Old Farts beat the odds." He drank.

"I'm sorry to bring up memories," Lowen said, after a minute.

"We're talking and drinking, Doctor Lowen," Wilson said. "Memories will surface just as a matter of course."

"You can call me Danielle, you know," Lowen said. "Or Dani. Either is fine. I figure if we've drunk this much Scotch together, we should be on a first-name basis."

"I can't argue with that," Wilson said. "Then call me Harry."

"Hello, Harry."

"Hello, Dani."

They clinked their cups together.

"They're renaming my high school after your friend," Lowen said. "It was Hickenlooper High. Now it's going to be Perry High."

"There is no higher honor to be bestowed," Wilson said.

"I'm actually kind of annoyed by it," Lowen said. "I get mail now saying, 'Greetings, Perry Graduates,' and I'm all, 'What? I didn't go

there.'"

"If I know John at all, he'd be mildly embarrassed to have your high school's name changed out from under you," Wilson said.

"Well, to be fair, the man *did* free my entire planet from the Colonial Union's systematic and centuries-long campaign of repression and social engineering," Lowen said. "So I guess I shouldn't begrudge him the high school."

"Possibly not," Wilson agreed.

"But that just brings us back around to the original question: What the hell was the Colonial Union thinking?" Lowen asked.

"Do you want a serious answer?" Wilson asked.

"Sure, if it's not too complicated," Lowen said. "I'm a little drunk."

"I'll use small words," Wilson promised. "I would be willing to bet that in the beginning the Colonial Union justified it by thinking that they were both protecting the Earth by taking the focus off it and onto the Colonial Union worlds, and then also helping humanity in general by using the Earth to help our colonies grow as quickly as they could with new immigrants and soldiers."

"So that's at first," Lowen said. "What about later?"

"Later? Habit," Wilson said.

Lowen blinked. "'Habit'? That's it? That's all you got?"

Wilson shrugged. "I didn't say it was a *good* answer," he said. "Just a serious one."

"It's a good thing I'm a diplomat," Lowen said. "Or I would tell you what I *really* thought of that."

"I can guess," Wilson said.

"And what do *you* think, Harry?" Lowen asked. "Do you think that Earth and the Colonial Union should have an alliance? After everything that's happened?"

"I'm not sure I'm the best-qualified person out there to answer that," Wilson said.

"Oh, come on," Lowen said, and waved at the officers lounge, whose population was still limited to the two of them and the

Laphroaig. “It’s just you and me.”

“I think that it’s a scary universe out there,” Wilson said. “With not a lot of humans in it.”

“But what about the Conclave?” Lowen asked. “Four hundred alien races not actively killing each other. Doesn’t that make it a little less scary?”

“For those four hundred races? Sure,” Wilson said. “As long as it lasts. For everyone else? Still scary.”

“You’re cheerful,” Lowen said.

“I prefer ‘realist,’” Wilson said.

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Six drinks, even later:

“Are you green everywhere?” Lowen asked.

“Excuse me?” Wilson said.

“I am asking purely on scientific grounds,” Lowen said.

“Thanks,” Wilson said, dryly. “That makes it so much better.”

“I mean, unless you prefer unscientific reasons for me asking,” Lowen said.

“Why, Dr. Lowen…” Wilson feigned shock. “I am not that kind of boy.”

“Once again, I am skeptical,” Lowen said.

“Tell you what,” Wilson said. “Ask me that question sometime when you haven’t just consumed a substantial portion of a bottle of fine single-malt Scotch whiskey in a single sitting. If you’re moved to do so, you might get a different answer from me.”

“Fine,” Lowen said sourly, and then looked over at Wilson somewhat as an owl would. “You’re not drunk,” she said.

“No,” Wilson said.

“You drank as much as me, and I’m drunk as a skunk,” she said. “Even accounting for body mass, you should be plastered, too.”

“Benefit of the new body,” Wilson said. “A much higher alcohol tolerance. It’s more complicated than that, but it’s late and you’re

drunk, so maybe we'll save it for tomorrow. Speaking of which, it's time to get you into your crawl space, if you want to be at the negotiations tomorrow without a hangover." He stood up and offered his hand to Lowen.

She took it, wobbling only slightly. "Whoa," she said. "Someone did something to the artificial gravity."

"Yes," Wilson said. "That's it exactly. Come on." He navigated her through the corridors and up the decks to the berths Captain Coloma had assigned to the observers.

"Almost there," Wilson said to Lowen.

"About time," Lowen said. "I think you took the scenic route. The scenic route that spins a bit."

"Maybe I'll bring you some water," Wilson said. "And some crackers."

"This is an excellent idea," Lowen said, and then jumped a little at the noise of the door of one of the berths flying open and slamming against the bulkhead.

Wilson looked toward the noise and saw Thierry Bourkou, looking frantic. "Is everything all right, Mr. Bourkou?" he asked.

Bourkou turned to Wilson, saw Lowen on his arm and rushed toward them. "Dani, Dani, come quick," he said. "It's Cong."

"What's Cong?" Lowen asked, less tired and slurred than moments before. Wilson could see the panic on her colleague's face, and his alarmed tone was pushing the drunkenness down. "What is it?"

"He's not breathing," Bourkou said. "He's blue and he's not breathing." He grabbed Lowen's hand and pulled her down the corridor toward his berth. "He's not breathing and I think he might be dead."

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"He was fine when he lay down," Bourkou said. "He and I have both been feeling tired, so we both took naps at the same time. Then he started snoring, so I turned on the white noise machine. Then I fell

asleep. When I woke up I told him I was going to get him some tea and asked him if he wanted any. He didn't respond, so I went to shake him. That's when I saw his lips were blue."

All of the observers were in the *Clarke*'s medical bay, along with Wilson, Abumwe, Captain Coloma and Doctor Inge Stone, the *Clarke*'s chief medical officer. Liu was also there, on a stretcher.

"Did he say anything other than that he was tired?" Stone asked Bourkou. "Did he complain about any other pains or ailments?"

Bourkou shook his head. "I've known Cong for ten years," he said. "He's always been healthy. The worst that's ever happened to him is that he broke his foot when a motorcycle ran over it while he was crossing a street."

"What happened to him?" Franz Meyer asked. After Liu, he was the ranking diplomat among the observers.

"It's hard to say," Stone said. "It almost looks like carbon monoxide poisoning, but that doesn't make sense. Mr. Bourkou here was unaffected, which he wouldn't have been if it was carbon monoxide, and in any event there is nothing near those berths which generates or outputs that."

"What about the white noise generator?" Lowen asked. She was alert now, through a combination of caffeine, ibuprofen and nerves. "Is that something that could have done this?"

"Of course not," Meyer said, almost scornfully. "It has no moving parts other than the speakers. It doesn't output anything but white noise."

"What about allergies or sensitivities?" Stone asked.

Meyer shook his head this time. "He was lactose-intolerant, but that wouldn't have done this. And other than that he was not allergic to anything. It's as Thierry said. He's a healthy man. *Was* a healthy man."

"Aren't we overlooking something here?" asked Luiza Carvalho. Everyone looked to her; it was the first time she had spoken since the group gathered in the medical bay.

"Overlooking what?" asked Coloma.

"The possibility this isn't a natural death," Carvalho said. "Cong was a healthy man, with no previous health issues."

"With all due respect, Ms. Carvalho, that's probably further than we need to go for an explanation," Stone said. "It's rather more likely Mr. Liu fell prey to a previously undiagnosed condition. It's not uncommon, especially for people who have been superficially healthy. Their lack of obvious health issues means they don't get in to see a doctor as often as others would. That lets not-so-obvious issues sneak up on them."

"I understand that the simplest explanation is usually the correct one," Carvalho said. "Of course. But I also know that in my home country of Brazil, assassination by poisoning has made a comeback. Last year a senator from Mato Grosso was killed by arsenic."

"A political assassination?" Abumwe asked.

"No," Carvalho admitted. "He was poisoned by his wife for sleeping with one of his legislative aides."

"To be indelicate, may we assume such a situation is not happening here?" Abumwe asked.

Meyer looked around at his colleagues. "It's safe to say that none of us were sleeping with Cong," he said, to Abumwe. "It's also safe to say that none of us had any professional reason to want him dead, either. With the exception of Thierry, none of us knew him prior to this mission. The mission selection criteria were as much political as anything else. We all represent different political interests at home, so there was no direct competition or professional jealousy."

"Do all of your factions get along?" Wilson asked.

"For the most part," Meyer said, and then pointed at Lowen. "Doctor Lowen represents America's interests here, and the United States, for better or worse, still maintains a somewhat contentious primary position in global politics, especially post-Perry. The other political interests sought to minimize its influence on this mission, which is why Liu Cong was selected to head the mission, over U.S. objections, and why the U.S. representative—apologies here, Dani—is

the most junior on the mission. But none of that rose to the level of skullduggery."

"And I was with Lieutenant Wilson here for several hours, in any event," Lowen said. This raised eyebrows, both Meyer's and Abumwe's. "Cong asked me to get to know our Colonial Union liaison better so we could get a better understanding of the lay of the land. So I did." She turned to Wilson. "No offense," she said.

"None taken," Wilson said, amused.

"So it seems like poisoning or assassination is off the table," Stone said.

"Unless it was someone on the Colonial Union side," Carvalho said.

Abumwe, Wilson and Coloma exchanged glances.

This did not go unnoticed. "Okay, what was that?" asked Lowen.

"You mean the sudden, significant glances," Wilson said, before Abumwe or Coloma could say anything.

"Yes, that would be what I'm talking about," said Lowen.

"We've had some recent incidents of sabotage," Abumwe said, shooting an irritated glance at Wilson.

"On this ship?" Meyer asked.

"Not originating on this ship, no," Coloma said. "But affecting the ship."

"And you think this could be another one of these?" Meyer said.

"I doubt that it is," Abumwe said.

"But you can't be one hundred percent sure," Meyer persisted.

"No, we can't," Abumwe said.

"What am I missing here?" Stone asked, to Abumwe and Coloma.

"Later, Inge," Coloma said. Stone closed her mouth, unhappy.

"I think we may have a potential issue here," Meyer said.

"What do you suggest we do about it?" Abumwe asked.

"I think we need an autopsy," Meyer said. "The sooner, the better."

"Doctor Stone can certainly perform one," Coloma said. Meyer shook his head; Coloma frowned. "Is that not acceptable?"

"Not by herself," Meyer said. "With no offense offered to Doctor Stone, this has become a politically sensitive event. If someone from within the Colonial Union has been sabotaging your efforts, then all of the Colonial Union's apparatus becomes suspect. I have no doubt at all that Doctor Stone will do a fine job with the autopsy. I also have no doubt at all that there are politicians back on Earth who would look at a Colonial Union doctor clearing the Colonial Union of the suspicious death of an Earth diplomat and use it for their own agendas, whatever those agendas might be."

"There's a problem, then," Stone said. "Because all of my staff are Colonial Union, too."

Meyer looked over to Lowen, who nodded. "I'll do the autopsy with you," she said, to Stone.

Stone blinked. "Are you a medical doctor?" she asked.

Lowen nodded. "University of Pennsylvania," she said. "Specialized in hematology and nephrology. Practiced my specialty for about three months before I joined the State Department as an advisor."

"Doctor Lowen is eliding the fact that her father is United States Secretary of State Saul Lowen," Meyer said, smiling. "And that she was more or less dragooned into this role at her father's behest. Which is to take nothing away from her own talents."

"Anyway," Lowen said, slightly embarrassed by Meyer's commentary. "I have the degree and I have the experience. Between the two of us we can make sure no one complains about the results of the autopsy."

Stone looked at Coloma, who looked over to Abumwe. Abumwe gave a nod. So did Coloma. "All right," she said. "When do you want to start?"

"I need some sleep," Lowen said. "I think we could all use some sleep. We all have a busy day tomorrow." Stone nodded her assent; the Earth observers excused themselves and headed to their berths.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Coloma asked Wilson after they had gone.

"You mean, about letting them know about the sabotage," Wilson said. Coloma nodded. "Look. They already caught us in the reaction. They knew something was up. We could have either lied poorly and had them distrust us, or we could tell them the truth and gain a little trust. The leader of their mission has died, and we don't know why. We can use all the trust we can get."

"The next time you get the urge to make diplomatic decisions, look to me first," Abumwe said. "You've done it before, so I know you can do it now. This isn't your mission and it's not your call to make about what we tell them and what we don't."

"Yes, Ambassador," Wilson said. "I wasn't intentionally trying to make your job harder."

"Lieutenant, I don't give a damn about your *intentions,*" Abumwe said. "I thought you knew that by now."

"I do," Wilson said. "Sorry."

"You're dismissed, Wilson," Abumwe said. "The grown-ups need to talk in private." She turned to Coloma and Stone. Wilson took the hint and left.

Lowen was waiting in the corridor for him.

"You're supposed to be asleep," Wilson said.

"I wanted to apologize to you," Lowen said. "I'm pretty sure what I said in there about spending time with you came out wrong."

"That part where you said that you were spending time with me on Liu's orders," Wilson said.

"Yeah, that," Lowen said.

"Would it make you feel better to know that my boss told me to spend time with you?" Wilson said.

"Not really," Lowen said.

"I won't admit it to you, then," Wilson said. "At least not until you've had time to collect yourself."

"Thanks," Lowen said, wryly.

Wilson reached out and touched Lowen's arm in sympathy. "Okay, seriously," he said. "How are you?"

"Oh, you know," Lowen said. "My boss is dead and he was a really nice man, and tomorrow I have to cut into him to see if someone murdered him. I'm just *great*."

"Come on," Wilson said, and put his arm around her. "I'll walk you back to your berth."

"Did your boss tell you to do that?" Lowen asked, jokingly.

"No," Wilson said, seriously. "This one's on me."

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Abumwe's supreme irritation, first at the disposition of the trade negotiations at the end of the first day, and then at the death of Liu Cong and the possible implication thereof, was evident in the second day of negotiations. Abumwe began by tearing Doodoodo a new one, in as brilliant a show of venomous politeness as Wilson had ever seen in his life. Doodoodo and his fellow negotiators actually began to cringe, in the Burfinor fashion, which Wilson decided was more of a scrotal-like contraction than anything else.

Watching the ambassador do her work, and doing it with something approaching vengeful joy, Wilson realized his long-held wish that Abumwe would actually *relax* from time to time was clearly in error. This was a person who operated best and most efficiently when she was truly and genuinely pissed off; wishing for her to mellow out was like wishing an alpha predator would switch to grains. It was missing the point.

Wilson's BrainPal pinged, internally and unseen by the others in the negotiating parties. It was Lowen. *Can you talk?* the message said.

No, but you can, Wilson sent. *You're coming through my BrainPal. No one else will be bothered.*

Hold on, switching to voice, Lowen sent, and then her voice came through. "I think we have a big problem," she said.

Define "problem," Wilson sent.

"We've finished the autopsy," Lowen sent. "Physically there was nothing wrong with Cong. Everything looked healthy and as close to perfect as a man his age could be. There are no ruptures or aneurysms, no organ damage or scarring. Nothing. There is no reason he should be dead."

That indicates foul play to you? Wilson sent.

"Yes," Lowen said. "And there's another thing, which is the reason I'm talking to you. I took some of his blood for testing and I'm seeing a lot of anomalies in it. There's a concentration of foreign particles in it that I haven't seen before."

Poison compounds? Wilson asked.

"I don't think so," Lowen said.

Have you shown them to Stone? Wilson asked.

"Not yet," Lowen said. "I thought you actually might be more help for this. Can you receive images?"

Sure, Wilson sent.

"Okay, sending now," Lowen said. A notice of a received image flashed in Wilson's peripheral vision; he pulled it up.

It's blood cells, Wilson sent.

"It's not just blood cells," Lowen said.

Wilson paid closer attention and saw specks amid the cells. He zoomed in. The specks gained in size and detail. Wilson frowned and called up a separate image and compared the two.

They look like SmartBlood nanobots, Wilson finally sent.

"That's what I thought they might be," Lowen said. "And that's bad. Because they're not supposed to be there. Just like Cong isn't supposed to be dead. If you have someone who isn't supposed to be dead and no physical reason that he should have died, and you also have a high concentration of foreign material in his blood, it's not hard deduction that the one has to do with the other."

So you think a Colonial did this, Wilson sent.

"I have no idea who did this," Lowen said. "I just know what it looks like."

Wilson had nothing to say to this.

"I'm going to go tell Stone what I found and then I'll have to tell Franz," Lowen said. "I'm sure Stone will tell Coloma and Abumwe. I think we have about an hour before this all gets bad."

Okay, Wilson sent.

"If you can think of something between now and then that will keep this from going to hell, I wouldn't mind," Lowen said.

I'll see what I can do, Wilson sent.

"Sorry, Harry," Lowen said, and disconnected.

Wilson sat silently for a moment, watching Abumwe and Doodoodo as the two of them danced their verbal diplomatic dance about what was the correct balance of trade between starships and biomedical scanners. Then he sent a priority message to Abumwe's PDA.

Take a ten-minute break, it said. *Trust me.*

Abumwe didn't acknowledge the priority message for a few minutes; she was too busy hammering on Doodoodo. When the Burfinor representative finally managed to get a word in edgewise, she glanced down at her PDA and then glanced over at Wilson with a nearly unnoticeable expression that no one else would register as, *You have got to be fucking kidding me*. Wilson acknowledged this with an equally subtle expression that he hoped would read, *I am so very not fucking kidding you*. Abumwe stared at him for a second longer, then interrupted Doodoodo to ask for a quick recess. Doodoodo, flustered because he thought he was on a roll, agreed. Abumwe motioned to Wilson to join her in the hall.

"You don't seem to be remembering our discussion from last night," Abumwe said.

"Lowen found what looks like SmartBlood nanobots in Liu's blood," Wilson said, ignoring Abumwe's statement. "If Stone hasn't updated you about it yet, you'll get the message soon. And so will Meyer and the rest of the observers."

"And?" Abumwe said. "Not that I don't care, but Liu is dead and these negotiations are not, and you didn't need to interrupt them to give me an update I would be receiving anyway."

"I didn't interrupt you for that," Wilson said. "I interrupted you because I need you to have them give me that scanner test unit back. Immediately."

"Why?" Abumwe said.

"Because I think there's something very fishy about SmartBlood nanobots being found in Liu's bloodstream, and I want to get a much better look at them," Wilson said. "The equipment in the medical bay came standard issue with the *Clarke* when it rolled off the line fifty years ago. We need better tools."

"And you need it now why?" Abumwe said.

"Because when today's negotiations are done, the shit is going to hit the fan," Wilson said. "Ambassador, a diplomat from Earth is dead and it looks like the Colonial Union did it. When Meyer and the rest of the observers get back to the *Clarke,* they're going to send a drone back to Phoenix Station and to the Earth's mission there. They're going to be recalled and we're going to be obliged to take them back immediately. So you're going to fail this negotiation, there's going to be a deeper division between Earth and the Colonial Union and all the blame is going to come back to us. Again."

"Unless you can figure this out between now and then," Abumwe said.

"Yes," Wilson said. "SmartBlood is tech, Ambassador. Tech is what I do. And I already know how to operate these machines because I worked with them while I was evaluating them. But I need one *now*. And you need to get it for me."

"You think this will work?" Abumwe asked.

Wilson held his hands out in a *maybe?* motion. "I know if we don't try this, then we're screwed. If this is a shot in the dark, it's still a shot."

Abumwe took out her PDA and opened a line to Hillary Drolet, her assistant. "Tell Doodoodo I need to see him in the hall. Now." She

cut the connection and looked back to Wilson. "Anything else you want? As long as I am taking requests."

"I need to borrow the shuttle to go back to the *Clarke*," Wilson said. "I want both Lowen and Stone to watch me so there's no doubt what I find."

"Fine," Abumwe said.

"I'd also like for you to drag on negotiations today as long as you can," Wilson said.

"I don't think that will be a problem," Abumwe said.

Doodoodo appeared in the hallway, eyestalks waggling apologetically.

"And if at all possible, you might want to get that deal done today," Wilson said, looking at Doodoodo. "Just in case."

"Lieutenant Wilson, I am already far ahead of you on this one," Abumwe said.

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"Someone in this room is a killer!" Wilson said.

"Please don't say that when they actually show up," Lowen said.

"That's why I'm saying it now," Wilson said.

Wilson, Lowen and Stone were in the medical bay, awaiting Abumwe, Meyer, Bourkou and Coloma. Coloma was on her way from the bridge; the others were coming from the shuttle that had just docked.

"They're on their way," Lowen said, glancing at her PDA. "Franz tells me they wrapped up the negotiations today, too. Abumwe apparently got an excellent deal for the scanners."

"Good," Wilson said, and patted the scanner he had been using. "Maybe that will mean I can keep mine. This thing is sweet."

Coloma arrived; Abumwe, Meyer and Bourkou followed a minute after.

"Now that we're all here, let's get started," Wilson said. "If you'll check your PDAs, you'll see some images I sent to you." Everyone in

the room aside from Wilson, Stone and Lowen reached for their PDAs. "What you're seeing there is a sample of Liu Cong's blood. In it you'll see red and white blood cells, platelets and also something else. That something else looks like SmartBlood nanobots. For those of you from Earth, SmartBlood is the non-organic substance that replaces blood in Colonial Defense Forces soldiers. It has superior oxygen-handling properties and other benefits."

"How did that get into his blood?" Meyer asked.

"That's an interesting question," Wilson said. "Almost as interesting as the other question I have, which is *when* did it get into his blood."

"If this is a Colonial Union product, then it would seem that it would have gotten into his system out here," Bourkou said.

"I would have thought so, too," Wilson said. "But then I got a closer look at the nanobots. Go ahead and look at the second image I sent you."

They turned to look at the second picture, which showed two similar-looking objects, one next to the other.

"The first object is a close-up of what we found in Liu's blood," Wilson said. "The second is a close-up of an actual SmartBlood nanobot, which was taken from me, a couple of hours ago." He held up his thumb to show the pinprick there.

"They look the same to me," Meyer said.

"Yes, and I suspect they're supposed to," Wilson said. "It's not until you look inside of them, in substantial detail, that you notice particular differences. If all we had was the *Clarke*'s equipment, we wouldn't have been able to see the differences. Even with the Colonial Union's top-of-the-line equipment, it would have taken some time. Fortunately, we have some new toys. So go ahead and flip to the next image."

Everyone forwarded to the third image.

"I don't expect any of you to know what you're looking at here, but those with some technical experience with SmartBlood will note two major differences with the internal structure," Wilson said. "The

first has to do with how the nanobots handle oxygen sequestration. The second has to do with the radio receiver in the 'bot."

"What do these differences mean?" Abumwe asked.

"With regard to oxygen sequestration, it means the 'bots are able to hold on to substantially more oxygen molecules," Wilson says. "It doesn't do anything with them, though. SmartBlood is designed to facilitate oxygen transfer to body tissue. What's in Liu's blood, however, doesn't do that. It just holds on to the oxygen. It goes, grabs the oxygen in the lungs, and doesn't let go. There's less oxygen for the actual red blood cells to carry, and less for the body tissues to take in."

"This stuff suffocated Cong," Lowen said.

"Right," Wilson said. "As for the receiver, well, SmartBlood takes direction from its owner's BrainPal via an encrypted channel and reverts by default to its primary role, which is oxygen transport." He pointed to Abumwe's PDA. "This stuff also communicates by encrypted signal. Its default state is off, however. It's only on the job when it's receiving a signal. Its signal doesn't come from a BrainPal, however."

"Where does it come from?" Meyer asked.

Lowen held up an object. It was Meyer's white noise generator.

"It can't be," Meyer said.

"It *can* be," Wilson said. "And it is, because we checked it. How do you think we can describe what this stuff does? This is why I said the interesting question is *when* this stuff got into Liu's blood. Because this"—Wilson pointed to the white noise generator, which Lowen now set on the table—"strongly suggests that it happened before you folks left Earth."

"How did you find it?" Abumwe asked.

"We walked through Liu's death," Stone said. "We knew when he died, and we knew that these 'bots needed a transmitter, and Mr. Bourkou said that he had been running the white noise generator to drown out Liu's snoring."

"You can't think I did it," Bourkou said.

"You set this thing off in the same room," Wilson said.

"It's not even mine," Bourkou said. "Franz let me borrow it. It's his."

"That's true," Wilson said, turning to Meyer.

Meyer looked shocked. "I didn't kill Cong! And this doesn't make logical sense in any event. Cong was supposed to have a berth to himself. This thing wasn't supposed to have been in the same room."

"A very good point," Wilson said. "Which is why I checked the effective transmitting radius of the generator's 'bot transmitter. It's about twenty meters. Your berth is right next door, and the berths are narrow enough that Liu's bunk is well within the radius, even accounting for signal attenuation through the common bulkhead."

"We'd been traveling for more than a week before we arrived here," Meyer said. "Before this we had individual staterooms, but we were still close enough for this thing to work. I used it every night. Nothing happened to Cong."

"Interestingly, there are two transmitters in the white noise generator," Wilson said. "One of them affects the 'bots. The second affects the first transmitter. It turns it on or off."

"So it wouldn't have done anything until you got here," Lowen said.

"This is crazy," Meyer said. "I don't have a remote control for this thing! Go to my berth! Check for yourself!"

Wilson looked over at Captain Coloma. "I'll have crew go through his berth," she said.

"Have you dumped trash recently?" Wilson said.

"No," Coloma said. "We usually don't dump until we return to Phoenix Station, and when we do, we don't do it in other people's systems. That's rude."

"Then I would suggest we look through the trash," Wilson said. "I can give you the transmitting frequency if it helps." Coloma nodded.

"Why did you do it?" Bourkou asked Meyer.

"I didn't do it!" Meyer yelled. "You are just as likely to have done it as I am, Thierry. You had the generator in your possession. You're the one who convinced Cong to give up his berth for me. I didn't ask him."

"You complained about claustrophia," Bourkou said.

"I joked about claustrophobia, you ass," Meyer said.

"And I wasn't the one who suggested it to him," Bourkou said. "It was Luiza. So don't pin it on me."

A strange expression crossed Meyer's face. Wilson caught it. So did Abumwe. "What it is it?" she asked Meyer.

Meyer looked around at the group, as if debating whether to say something, then sighed. "I've been sleeping with Luiza Carvalho for the last three months," he said. "During the selection process for this mission and then since. It's not a relationship, it's more taking advantage of a mutual opportunity. I didn't think it would matter since neither of us was in a position to select the other for the mission."

"All right," Abumwe said. "So?"

"So Luiza always complained about me sleeping badly," Meyer said, and pointed at the white noise generator. "Two weeks ago, after we knew who was on the mission, she bought me *that*. Said it would help me sleep."

"Luiza was the one who suggested to Meyer that he let me borrow the generator," Bourkou said. "To counteract Cong's snoring."

"Where is Ms. Carvalho?" Stone asked.

"She said she was going to her berth," Abumwe said. "Lieutenant Wilson didn't ask for her to be here, so I didn't ask her to come."

"We should probably have someone get her," Wilson said, but Coloma was already on her PDA, ordering someone to get her.

Coloma's PDA pinged almost immediately thereafter; it was Neva Balla. Coloma put her executive officer on the speaker so everyone in the room could hear. "We have a problem," Balla said. "There's someone in the portside maintenance airlock. It looks like one of the Earth people."

"Send me the image," Coloma said. When she got it, she bounced it to the PDAs of everyone else in the room.

It was Luiza Carvalho.

"What is she doing?" Lowen asked.

"Lock out the airlock," Coloma said.

"It's too late," Balla said. "She's already started the purge cycle."

"She must have been listening in somehow," Abumwe said.

"How the hell did she get in there?" Coloma asked, angry.

"The same way she got Meyer and Bourkou to help her kill Liu," Wilson said.

"But why did she do it?" Meyer said. "Who is she working with? Who is she working for?"

"We're not going to get an answer to that," Wilson said.

"Well, we know one thing, at least," Lowen said.

"What's that?" Wilson asked.

"Whoever's been sabotaging you up here, it looks like they're on the job down there on Earth," Lowen said.

"Almost got away with it, too," Wilson said. "If we didn't have that scanner, it would have looked like the Colonial Union killed him. By the time it was cleared up, it would have been too late to fix it."

No one said anything to that.

In the video feed, Carvalho looked up to where the camera was, as if looking at the group in the medical bay.

She waved.

The air purged out of the airlock. Carvalho exhaled and kept exhaling long enough to stay conscious until the hull lock opened.

She let herself out.

"Dani," Wilson said.

"Yeah, Harry," Lowen said.

"You still have the Laphroaig?" Wilson asked.

"I do," Lowen said.

"Good," Wilson said. "Because right now, I think we all need a drink."

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EPISODE TEN

This Must Be the Place

Hart Schmidt took the shuttle from the *Clarke* to Phoenix Station and an interstation tram to the station's main commuter bay, and then he caught one of the ferries that arrived at and departed from Phoenix Station every fifteen minutes. The ferry headed down to the Phoenix Station Terminal at the Phoenix City Hub, which aggregated most of the civilian mass transportation for the oldest and most populous city of the oldest and most populous human interstellar colony planet.

Upon exiting the ferry, Hart walked through spaceport terminal C and boarded the interterminal tram for the PCH main terminal. Three minutes later, Hart exited the tram, went from the platform to the immensely long escalator and emerged in the main terminal. It was one of the largest single buildings humans had ever built, a vast domed structure that housed stores, shops, offices, hotels and even apartments for those who worked at the hub, schools for their children, hospitals and even a jail, although Hart had no personal experience with the last two.

Hart smiled as he came out into the main terminal and stepped onto the terminal floor. In his mind, as always, he imagined the mass of humanity bustling through suddenly grabbing the hands of the people next to them and waltzing in unison. He was pretty sure he'd seen a scene like that in a movie once, either here in the main terminal or in a terminal or station much like it. It never happened, of course. It didn't mean that Hart didn't keep wishing for it.

His first stop was the PCH Campbell Main Terminal Hotel. Hart checked into a one-step-above-standard-sized room, dropped his bag at the foot of the queen-sized bed and then immediately gloried, after months of sharing his broom-closet-sized "officer quarters" on the *Clarke* with another diplomat, in having nearly forty square meters of no one else in his living space.

Hart sighed contentedly and immediately fell into a nap. Three hours later he awoke, took a shower that was indecently hot and indecently long and ordered room service, not neglecting a hot fudge sundae. He tipped the room service delivery person exorbitantly, ate until he felt he would explode, switched the entertainment display to the classic movies channel and watched hundred-year-old stories of early colonial drama and adventure, starring actors long dead, until his eyes snapped shut seemingly of their own accord. He slept dreamlessly, the display on, for close to ten hours.

Late the next morning, Hart checked out of the Campbell, took another interterminal tram to train terminal A and hopped on train 311, with travel to Catahoula, Lafourche, Feliciana and Terrebonne. Schmidt stayed on the train all the way to Terrebonne and then had to run to connect with the Tangipahopa express, which he caught as the doors were closing. At Tangipahopa, he boarded the Iberia local and got off at the third stop, Crowley. A car was waiting for him there. He smiled as he recognized Broussard Kueltzo, the driver.

"Brous!" he said, giving the man a hug. "Happy Harvest."

"Long time, Hart," Brous said. "Happy Harvest to you, too."

"How are you doing?" Hart asked.

"The same as always," he said. "Working for your dad, hauling his ass from place to place. Keeping up the Kueltzo family tradition of being the power behind the Schmidt family throne."

"Come on," Hart said. "We're not *that* helpless."

"It's okay for you to think that," Brous said. "But I have to tell you that one day last month I had to take Mom into the hospital for tests, and your mother was out at one of her organization meetings. Your dad

called my mom's PDA, asking how to work the coffee machine. She's getting blood drawn and she's walking him through pressing buttons. Your dad is one of the most powerful people on Phoenix, Hart, but he'd starve in a day if he was left on his own."

"Fair enough," Hart said. "How is your mother?" Magda Kueltzo might or might not actually be the power behind the Schmidt throne, but there was no doubt most of the family was deeply fond of her.

"Much better," Brous said. "In fact, she's busy working the meal you're going to be stuffing down your throat in just a few hours, so we better get you to it." He took Hart's bag and swung it into the car's backseat. The two men hopped into the front; Brous punched in the destination and the car drove itself.

"It's not a very demanding job," Hart ventured as the car pulled itself away from the station.

"That's sort of the point," Brous said. "In my quote unquote spare time, I get to work on the poetry, which incidentally has been doing very well, thanks for asking. That is insofar as poetry does well, which you understand is a highly relative thing and has been for centuries. I am an established poet now, and I make almost nothing for it."

"Sorry about that," Hart said.

Brous shrugged. "It's not so bad. Your dad has been generous in that way of his. You know how he is. Always thumping on about people having to make their own way in the world and the value of an honest day's labor. He'd rather die than fund a grant. But he gives me a ridiculously easy job and pays me well enough that I can work on my words."

"He likes being the patron," Hart said.

"Right," Brous said. "I won the Nova Acadia Poetry medal last year for my book and he was more proud of it than I was. I let him put the medal in his office."

"That's Dad," Hart said.

Brous nodded. "He did the same thing with Lisa," he said, mentioning his sister. "Had her scrub toilets at the house for a year,

then paid her enough for it to survive grad school in virology. Went to her doctoral ceremony. Insisted on getting a picture. It's on his desk."

"That's great," Hart said.

"I know you and he have gone a few rounds on things," Brous ventured.

"He's still irritated that I went into the Colonial Union diplomatic service rather than into Phoenix politics," Hart said.

"He'll get over it eventually," Brous suggested.

"How long are you going to keep the job?" Hart asked, changing the subject.

"It's funny you should ask," Brous said, catching the attempt and rolling with it. "The medal helped me get a teaching position at University of Metairie. It was supposed to start at the beginning of the fall, but I asked for them to set it back a semester so I could help your dad through the election season."

"How did it go?" Hart said.

"Oh, man," Brous said. "You haven't been following it at all?"

"I've been in space," Hart said.

"It was brutal," Brous said. "Not for your dad, of course. No one even ran against him here. They're going to have to wheel him out of his office. But the rest of the PHP took a thumping. Lost sixty seats in the regional parliament. Lost ninety-five in the global. The New Greens formed a coalition with the Unionists and put in a new prime minister and heads of department."

"How did that happen?" Hart asked. "I've been away for a while, but not so long that Phoenix should have suddenly gone squishy. I say that as a squishy sort, understand."

"Understood," Brous said. "I voted New Green in the regional myself. Don't tell your dad."

"Deep dark secret," Hart promised.

"The PHP got lazy," Brous said. "They've been in power so long, they forgot they could be voted out. Some bad people in key positions, a couple of stupid scandals, and a charismatic head of the New Green

party. Add it all up and people took a chance on someone new. It won't last, I think; the New Greens and the Unionists are already arguing and the PHP will do some housecleaning. But in the meantime your dad is in a foul mood about it. Even more so because he was one of the architects of the global party strategy. The collapse makes him look bad personally, or so he feels."

"Oh, boy," Hart said. "This will make it a cheerful Harvest Day."

"Yeah, he's been moody," Brous said. "Your mother has been keeping him in line, but you're going to have the whole family at home this Harvest, and you know how he gets with the whole clan there. Especially with Brandt rising in the Unionist party."

"The Schmidt boys," Hart said. "Brandt the traitor, Hart the underachiever and Wes … well, Wes."

Brous smiled at that. "Don't you forget your sister," he said.

"No one forgets Catherine, Brous," Hart said. "Catherine the Unforgettable."

"They're all already there, you know," Brous said. "At the house. They all got in last night. All of them, all their spouses and children. I'm not going to lie to you, Hart. One of the reasons I came to get you was so I could have a few minutes of quiet."

Hart grinned at this.

Presently the Schmidt family compound came into view, all 120 acres of it, with the main house set on a hill, rising above the orchards, fields and lawns. Home.

"I remember when I was six and Mom came to work here," Brous said. "I remember driving up to this place and thinking there was no way one family could live in that much space."

"Well, after you arrived, it wasn't just one family," Hart said.

"True enough," Brous said. "I'll tell you another story you'll find amusing. When I was in college, I brought my girlfriend to the carriage house and she was amazed we had so much living space there. I was afraid to take her up to the main house after that. I figured she'd stop being impressed with me."

"Was she?" Hart asked.

"No," Brous said. "She became unimpressed with me for other reasons entirely." He switched the car to manual, led it up the rest of the driveway and stopped at the front door. "Here you are, Hart. The entire family is inside, waiting for you."

"What would it cost for you to drive me back?" Hart joked.

"In a couple of days I'll do it for free," Brous said. "Until then, my friend, you're stuck."

• • •

"Ah, the prodigal spaceman returns," Brandt Schmidt said. He, like the rest of the Schmidt siblings, lounged on the back patio of the main house, watching the various children and spouses on the front surface of the back lawn. Brandt came up to Hart to give him a hug, followed by Catherine and Wes. Brandt pressed the cocktail he had in his hand into Hart's. "I haven't started on this one yet," he said. "I'll make another."

"Where's Mom and Dad?" Hart asked, sipping the drink. He frowned. It was a gin and tonic, more than a little heavy on the gin.

"Mom's in with Magda, fussing over dinner," Brandt said, going over to the patio bar to mix himself another highball. "She'll be back presently. Dad's in his office, yelling at some functionary of the Phoenix Home Party. That will take a while."

"Ah," Hart said. Best to miss out on that.

"You heard about the latest elections," Brandt said.

"A bit," Hart said.

"Then you'll understand why he's in a bit of a *mood,*" Brandt said.

"It doesn't help that you continue to needle him about it," Catherine said, to Brandt.

"I'm not *needling* him about it," Brandt said. "I'm just not letting him get away with revising recent electoral history."

"That's pretty much the definition of 'needling,'" Wes said, laconically, from his lounge, which was close to fully reclined. His eyes

were closed, a tumbler of something brown on the patio itself, by his outstretched hand.

"I recognize I'm telling him things he doesn't want to hear right now," Brandt said.

"Needling," Catherine and Wes said, simultaneously. They were twins and could do that from time to time. Hart smiled.

"Fine, I'm needling him," Brandt said, took a sip of his gin and tonic, frowned and went back to the bar to add a splash more tonic. "But after so many years of listening to him talk about the historical import of each election and the PHP's role in it, I think it's perfectly fine to have a bit of turnabout."

"That's exactly what this Harvest Day needs," Catherine said. "Another perfectly good dinner from Magda growing cold because you and Dad are going at it again at the table."

"Speak for yourself," Wes said. "They never stopped me from eating."

"Well, Wes, you've always had a special talent for tuning out," Catherine said. "It puts the rest of us off our appetite."

"I don't apologize for being the only one of us who has any interest at all in politics," Brandt said.

"No one wants you to apologize," Catherine said. "And you know we all have an interest in politics."

"I don't," Wes said.

"We all have an interest in politics except for Wes," Catherine amended, "who is just happy to coast on the benefits of the family having a good political name. So, by all means, Brandt, discuss politics all you like with Dad. Just wait until we get to the pie before you start going after each other."

"Politics and pie," Wes said. "Mmmmmm." He started fumbling about for his drink, connected with it and brought it to his lips, eyes still closed.

Brandt turned to Hart. "Help me out here," he said.

Hart shook his head. "I wouldn't mind getting through an entire Harvest Day without you and Dad tossing verbal knives at each other," he said. "I'm not here to talk politics. I'm here to spend time with my family."

Brandt rolled his eyes at his younger brother. "Have you *met* our family, Hart?"

"Oh, don't pester Hart about planetside politics," Catherine said. "This is the first time he's spent any time at home in Lord knows how long."

"Last Harvest Day," Hart volunteered.

"You can't genuinely expect him to keep up with the relatively trivial politics of Phoenix when he's grappling with Colonial Union–wide crises," Catherine said to Brandt, and then swiveled her head to Hart. "What was your most recent interstellar diplomatic triumph, Hart?"

"I helped electrocute a dog in order to save a peace negotiation," Hart said.

"What?" Catherine asked, momentarily flummoxed.

Wes cracked open an eye to look at Hart. "Is this like sacrificing a chicken to the gods?" he asked.

"It's more complicated than it sounds," Hart said. "And I would note that the dog survived."

"Well, thank goodness for *that,*" Brandt said, and turned to his sister. "I stand corrected, fair Catherine. Hart's clearly got more important things on his mind than mere *politics*."

Before Catherine could retort, Isabel Schmidt descended and embraced her youngest son. "Oh, Hart," she said. She gave him a peck on the cheek. "So good to see you, son. I can't believe it's been another whole year." She stepped back. "You look almost exactly the same."

"He *is* almost exactly the same," Brandt said. "He's not old enough yet to age poorly."

"Oh, Brandt, do shut up," Isabel said, not unkindly. "He's thirty. That's plenty old to start aging badly. You started at twenty-seven."

"Ouch, Mother," Brandt said.

"You brought it up, honey," Isabel said, and then turned her attention back to Hart. "You still enjoying the Colonial Union diplomatic service?" she asked. "Not getting bored with it?"

"It's not boring," Hart admitted.

"You still working with, oh, what's her name," Isabel said. "Ottumwa?"

"Abumwe," Hart said.

"That's the one," Isabel said. "Sorry. You know I'm terrible with names."

"It's all right," Hart said. "And yes, I'm still working with her."

"Is she still an asshole?" Catherine asked. "The last time you were home, the stories you told about her made her sound like a real piece of work."

"What stories do your assistants tell about you?" Brandt asked his sister.

"If they tell stories, they don't stay my assistants," Catherine said.

"She's gotten better," Hart said. "Or at the very least, I think I understand her better."

"That's good to hear," Isabel said.

"Ask him about the dog," Wes drawled from his lounge.

"The dog?" Isabel said, looking over to Wes and then back to Hart. "What about a dog?"

"You know what, I think I'll tell you that one later, Mom," Hart said. "Maybe after dinner."

"Does it end badly for the dog?" Isabel asked.

"End? No," Hart said. "It ends fine for the dog. It *middles* poorly for him, though."

"Diplomacy is awesome," Wes said.

"We thought you were coming in yesterday," Isabel said, changing the subject.

"I got hung up at the hub," Hart said, remembering his hotel room. "It was easier to head out first thing in the morning."

"Well, but you're staying for the week, right?" Isabel said.

"Five days, yes," Hart said. He had another night at the Campbell reserved before he headed back to the *Clarke*. He intended to use it.

"Okay, good," Isabel said. "If you have time, I have someone I'd like you to meet."

"Oh, Mom," Catherine said. "Are you really going to try this again?"

"There's nothing wrong with introducing Hart to some options," Isabel said.

"Does this option have a name?" Hart asked.

"Lizzie Chao," Isabel said.

"This is the same Lizzie Chao who I went to high school with," Hart said.

"I believe so," Isabel said.

"She's married," Hart said.

"She's separated," Isabel said.

"Which means she's married with an option to trade up," Catherine said.

"Mom, I remember Lizzie," Hart said. "She's really not my type."

"She has a brother," Wes said, from his lounge.

"He's not my type, either," Hart said.

"Who *is* your type these days, Hart?" Isabel asked.

"I don't have a type these days," Hart said. "Mom, I work out of a spaceship all year around. I share quarters that are smaller than our kitchen pantry. I spend my days trying to convince aliens we don't want to blow them up anymore. That's an all-day job. Given my circumstances, it would be foolish to attempt any sort of relationship. It wouldn't be fair to the other person, or to me, for that matter."

"Hart, you know I hate sounding like the stereotypical mother," Isabel said. "But you're the only one of my children who isn't in a relationship and having children. Even Wes managed it."

"Thanks, Mom," Wes said, lifting his hand in a lazy wave.

"I don't want you to end up feeling the good things in life are passing you by," Isabel said, to Hart.

"I don't feel that way," Hart said.

"Not now," Isabel said. "But honey, you're thirty and you're still at deputy level. If it doesn't happen for you in the next year or two, it's not going to happen. And then where are you going to be? I love you and want you to be happy. But it's time you start thinking realistically about these things and whether the CU diplomatic service is really the best use of your talents and your life."

Hart leaned over and gave his mother a peck on the cheek. "I'm going to go up and unpack, and then I'm going to check in on Dad," he said. He swallowed the rest of his drink and walked into the house.

"Subtlety still counts for something, Mom," Hart heard Catherine say as he entered the house. If his mother responded, however, it was lost to Hart.

• • •

Hart found his father, Alastair Schmidt, in his home office, situated in his parents' wing of the third floor, which included their bedroom, its master bath suite, attached and separate wardrobes, individual offices, library and drawing room. The children's wing of the house was no less appointed but arranged differently.

Alastair Schmidt was standing behind his desk, listening to one of his political underlings give him a report through a speaker. The underling was no doubt in a Phoenix Home Party cubicle in Phoenix City, trying desperately to get out of the office in order to celebrate Harvest Day with his family but pinned to his desk by the baleful attention of Schmidt, one of the grand old men of the party and of Phoenix global politics generally.

Hart poked his head around the open door and waved to let his father know he was home; his father waved him into the room brusquely and then turned his attention back to his unfortunate apparatchik. "I wasn't asking why the data was difficult to locate,

Klaus," he said. "I was asking why we don't seem to have it at all. 'Difficult to locate' and 'not in our possession' are two entirely separate things."

"I understand that, Minister Schmidt," Klaus the apparatchik was saying. "What I'm saying is that we're hampered by the holiday. Most people are out. The requests we filed are in and will be honored, but they have to wait until people get back."

"Well, you're in, aren't you?" Alastair said.

"Yes," Klaus said, and Hart caught the slight edge of misery in his voice at the fact. "But—"

"And the entire government doesn't in fact shut all the way down even on major global holidays," Alastair said, cutting off Klaus before he could offer another objection. "So your job right now is to find the people who are still working today, just like you are, get that data and those projections, and have them on my desk in an encrypted file before I go to bed tonight. And I have to tell you, Klaus, that I tend to go to bed early on Harvest Day. It's all that pie."

"Yes, Minister Schmidt," Klaus said, unhappily.

"Good," Alastair said. "Happy Harvest, Klaus."

"Happ—" Klaus was cut off as Alastair severed the connection.

"His Harvest isn't going to be happy because you're making him work on Harvest Day," Hart observed.

"If he'd gotten me that data yesterday like I asked and like he'd promised, he'd be at home, chewing on a drumstick," Alastair said. "But he didn't, so he's not, and that's on him."

"I noticed he still called you 'minister,'" Hart said.

"Ah, so you know about the election," Alastair said. "Brandt gloating, is he?"

"I heard it from other sources," Hart said.

"Officially, the Green-Union government is extending an olive branch to the PHP by asking me to stay on as minister for trade and transport," Alastair said. "Unofficially, the point was made to the coalition that they have no one near competent to run the ministry, and

that if they are going to screw up any one ministry, the one they don't want to screw up is the one that makes sure food arrives where it's supposed to and that people are able to get to work."

"It's a legitimate point," Hart said.

"Personally, the sooner this Green-Union coalition collapses, the happier I'll be, and I gave some thought to turning it down, just to watch the ensuing train wreck," Alastair said. "But then I realized that there would probably be actual train wrecks, and that's the sort of thing that will get everyone's head on a spike, not just the heads of those in the coalition."

Hart smiled. "That famous Alastair Schmidt compassion," he said.

"Don't you start," Alastair said. "I get enough of that from Brandt. It's not that I don't care. I do. But I'm also still pissed about the election results." He motioned at the chair in front of the desk, offering Hart the seat; Hart took it. Alastair sat in his own seat, regarding his son.

"How is life in the Colonial Union diplomatic corps?" Alastair asked. "I imagine it must be exciting, what with the collapse of relations between the Earth and the Colonial Union."

"We live in interesting times, yes," Hart said.

"And your Ambassador Abumwe seems to be in the thick of things lately," Alastair said. "Dashing between assignments all across known space."

"They have been keeping her busy," Hart said.

"And you've been busy as well?" Alastair asked.

"Mostly," Hart said. "I'm doing a lot of work with Lieutenant Harry Wilson, who is a CDF technician who handles various tasks for us."

"I know," Alastair said. "I have a friend who works for the Department of State. Keeps me up-to-date on the diplomatic reports from the *Clarke*."

"Is that so," Hart said.

"Not a whole lot of future in electrocuting dogs, Hart," Alastair said.

"*There* we go," Hart said.

"Am I wrong?" Alastair asked.

"Do you actually read the reports you get, Dad?" Hart said. "If you read the report about the dog, then you know what happened was that we ended up saving the peace negotiations and helped secure an alliance for the Colonial Union with a race that had been leaning toward aligning with the Conclave."

"Sure, after you carelessly allowed the dog to be eaten by a carnivorous plant, revealing the death site of a king whose disappearance started the race's civil war, the discovery of which threatened a peace process that by all indications wasn't threatened before," Alastair said. "You don't get credit for putting out fires you set yourself, Hart."

"The official report reads differently than your interpretation, Dad," Hart said.

"Of course it does," Alastair said. "If I were your bosses, I would write it that way, too. But I'm not your boss, and I can read between the lines better than most."

"Are you going somewhere with this, Dad?" Hart said.

"I think it's time you came back to Phoenix," Alastair said. "You gave the Colonial Union your best shot, and they've misused your talent. They stuck you with a diplomatic team that's been catching lost-cause missions for years, and assigned you to a CDF grunt who uses you for menial tasks. You're too accommodating to complain, and maybe you're even having fun, but you're not going anywhere, Hart. And maybe that's fine early in your career, but you're not early in your career anymore. You've dead-ended. It's over."

"Not that I agree with you," Hart said, "but why do you care, Dad? You've always told us that we have to make our own path, and you told us that we would have to sink or swim on our own. You're a veritable

raft of tough-love metaphors on the subject. If you think I'm sinking, you should be willing to let me sink."

"Because it's not just about *you,* Hart," Alastair said. He pointed at the speaker through which he had been yelling at Klaus. "I'm seventy-two years old, for Christ's sake. Do you think I want to be spending my time keeping some poor bastard from enjoying his Harvest Day? No, what I want to do is tell the PHP to get along without me and spend more time with those grandkids of mine."

Hart stared at his father blankly. At no point in the past had his father ever evinced more than the most cursory interest in his grandchildren. *Maybe that's because they're not interesting yet,* a part of Hart's brain said, and he could see the point. His father had become more engaged with his own children the older they got. And he could have his softer side; Hart's eyes flickered to the medal case on the wall, holding Brous's Nova Acadia award.

"I can't do that because I don't have the right people following me," Alastair continued. "Brandt's gloating because the Unionists have their share of power, but the thing is the reason it happened is because the PHP hasn't cultivated new talent, and now it's biting us in the ass."

"Wait," Hart said. "Dad, are you wanting me to join the PHP? Because I have to tell you, that's really not going to happen."

"You're missing my point," Alastair said. "The PHP hasn't developed new talent, but neither have the Greens or the Unionists. I'm still on the job because the whole next generation of political talent on Phoenix are, with very few exceptions, complete incompetents." He pointed in the direction of the patio, where the rest of the family was. "Brandt thinks I get annoyed with him because he's in with the Unionists. I get annoyed with him because he's not rising through its leadership fast enough."

"Brandt likes politics," Hart said. "I don't."

"Brandt likes everything *around* politics," Alastair said. "He doesn't give a crap about the politics itself, yet. That will come. It will come to Catherine, too. She's busy building a power base in the charity

world, rolling over people and getting them to thank her for it by supporting her works. When she finally transfers over into politics, she's going to make a beeline for prime minister."

"And what about Wes?" Hart asked.

"Wes is Wes," Alastair said. "One in every family. I love him, but I think of him as a sarcastic pet."

"I don't think I would tell Wes that if I were you," Hart said.

"He figured it out a long time ago," Alastair said. "I think he's at peace with it, especially as it requires nothing from him. As I said. One in every family. We can't afford two."

"So you want me to come home," Hart said. "And what do I do then? Just walk into some political role you've picked out for me? Because no one will see the obvious nepotism in that, Dad."

"Give me some credit for subtlety," Alastair said. "Do you really think Brandt is where he is with the Unionists all on his own? No. They saw the value in the Schmidt brand name, as it were, and we came to an arrangement about what they'd get in return for fast-tracking him in the organization."

"I would *definitely* not tell Brandt that if I were you," Hart said.

"Of course not," Alastair said. "But I am telling *you* so that you will understand how these things work."

"It's still nepotism," Hart said.

"I prefer to think of it as advancing people who are a known quantity," Alastair said. "And aren't you a known quantity, Hart? Don't you have skills, honed through your diplomatic career, that would have immediate use at a high level? Would you really want to start near the bottom? You're a little old for that now."

"You've just admitted the Colonial Union diplomatic corps taught me skills," Hart said.

"I never said you didn't have them," Alastair said. "I said they were being wasted. Do you want to use them as they ought to be used? This is the place, Hart. It's time to let the Colonial Union take care of the

Colonial Union. Come back to Phoenix, Hart. I need you. We need you."

"Lizzie Chao needs me," Hart said, ruefully.

"Oh, no, stay away from her," Alastair said. "She's bad news. She's been banging my field rep here in Crowley."

"Dad!" Hart said.

"Don't tell your mother," Alastair said. "She thinks Lizzie is a nice girl. And maybe she is nice. Just without very good judgment."

"We wouldn't want that," Hart said.

"You've had enough bad judgment in your life so far, Hart," Alastair said. "Time to start making some better choices."

• • •

"Didn't expect to see you again so soon," Brous Kueltzo said. He was leaning up against the car, reading a message on his PDA. Hart had walked down to the carriage house.

"I needed to get away from the family for a bit," Hart said.

"Already, huh?" Brous said.

"Yeah," Hart said.

"And you still have four days to go," Brous said. "I'll pray for you."

"Brous, can I ask you a question?" Hart said.

"Sure," Brous said.

"Did you ever resent us?" Hart asked. "Ever resent me?"

"You mean, for being obscenely rich and entitled and a member of one of the most important families on the entire planet through absolutely no effort of your own and for having everything you ever wanted served up to you on a platter without any idea how hard it was for the rest of us?" Brous said.

"Uh, yes," Hart said, taken slightly aback. "Yes. That."

"There was a period where I did, yeah," Brous said. "I mean, what do you expect? Resentment is about sixty percent of being a teenager. And all of you—you, Catherine, Wes, Brandt—were pretty clueless

about the rarefied air you lived in. Down here in the flats, living above the garage? Yeah, there was some resentment there."

"Do you resent us now?" Hart said.

"No," Brous said. "For one thing, bringing that college girlfriend back to the carriage house brought home the point that all things considered, I was doing just fine. I went to the same schools you did, and your family supported and cared for me, my sister and my mom, and not just in some distant noblesse oblige way, but as friends. Hell, Hart. I write *poetry,* you know? I have that because of you guys."

"Okay," Hart said.

"I mean, you all still have your moments of class cluelessness, trust me on this, and you all poke at each other in vaguely obnoxious ways," Brous said. "But I think even if you had no money, Brandt would be a status seeker, Catherine would steamroll everyone, Wes would float along, and you'd do your thing, which is to watch and help. You'd all be you. Everything else is circumstance."

"It's good to know you think so," Hart said.

"I do," Brous said. "Don't get me wrong. If you want to divest yourself of your share of the family trust fund and give to me, I'll take it. I'll let you sleep above the garage when you need to."

"Thanks," Hart said, wryly.

"What brought about this moment of questioning, if you don't mind me asking?" Brous asked.

"Oh, you know," Hart said. "Dad pressuring me to leave the diplomatic corps and join the family business, which is apparently running this entire planet."

"Ah, *that,*" Brous said.

"Yes, that," Hart said.

"That's another reason why I don't resent you guys," Brous said. "This whole 'born to rule' shit's gotta get tiring. All I have to do is drive your dad and string words together."

"What if you don't want to rule?" Hart said.

"Don't rule," Brous said. "I'm not sure why you're asking that, though, Hart. You've done a pretty good job of not ruling so far."

"What do you mean?" Hart asked.

"There's four of you," Brous said. "Two of you are primed to go into the family business: Brandt, because he likes the perks, and Catherine, because she's actually good at it. Two of you want nothing to do with it: Wes, who figured out early that one of you gets to be the screwup, so it might as well be him, and you. The screwup slot was already claimed by Wes, so you did the only logical thing left to third sons of a noble family—you went elsewhere to seek your fortune."

"Wow, you've actually thought about this a lot," Hart said.

Brous shrugged. "I'm a writer," he said. "And I've had a lot of time to observe you guys."

"You could have told me all this earlier," Hart said.

"You didn't ask," Brous said.

"Ah," Hart said.

"Also, I could be wrong," Brous said. "I've learned over time I'm full of just about as much shit as anyone."

"No, I don't think you are," Hart said. "Wrong, I mean. I remain neutral about the 'full of shit' part."

"Fair enough," Brous said. "It sounds like you're having a moment of existentialist crisis here, Hart, if you don't mind me saying."

"Maybe I am," Hart said. "I'm trying to decide what I want to be when I grow up. A nice thing to wonder about when you're thirty."

"I don't think it matters what age you are when you figure it out," Brous said. "I think the important thing is to figure it out before someone else tells you what you want to be, and they get it wrong."

• • •

"Who's giving the toast this year?" Isabel asked. They were all seated at the table: Alastair and Isabel, Hart, Catherine, Wes and Brandt and their spouses. The children were sequestered away in the next room, on

low tables, and were busy throwing peas and rolls at one another while the nannies vainly tried to keep control.

"I'll give the toast," Alastair said.

"You give the toast every year," Isabel said. "And your toasts are boring, dear. Too long and too full of politics."

"It's the family business," Alastair said. "It's a family dinner. What else should we talk about?"

"And besides which, you're still bitter about the election, and I don't want hear about it tonight," Isabel said. "So no toast from you."

"I'll give the toast," Brandt said.

"Oh, hell, no," Alastair said.

"Alastair," Isabel said, admonishingly.

"You thought *my* toast was going to be long and boring and full of politics," Alastair said. "The gloater in chief here will positively outstrip your expectations of me."

"Dad does have a point," Catherine said.

"Then you say it, dear," Isabel said to her.

"Indeed," Brandt said, clearly a little hurt at having his toast proposal rebuffed. "Regale us with tales of the people you've met and crushed in the last year."

"The hell with this," Wes said, and reached for the mashed potatoes.

"Wes," Isabel said.

"What?" Wes said, spooning out a heap of potatoes. "By the time you figure out who's toasting what, everything will be dry and cold. I have too much respect for Madga's work for that."

"I'll make the toast," Hart said.

"Ho!" Brandt said. "This is a first."

"Quiet, Brandt," Isabel said, and turned her attention to her youngest. "Go ahead, dear."

Hart stood, picked up his glass of wine and looked over the table.

"Every year, whoever makes the toast gets to talk about the events in their life from the last year," Hart said. "Well, I have to say this has been an eventful year. I got spit on by aliens as part of a diplomatic

negotiation. My ship was attacked with a missile and almost blew up around me. I got a human head delivered to me by an alien as part of another, entirely different negotiation. And, as you all recently learned, I helped zap a dog into unconsciousness as part of a third negotiation. All the while living day to day in a ship that's the oldest one in service, sleeping in a bunk that's barely wide enough for me, rooming with a guy who is either snoring or passing gas most of the night.

"If you think about it, it's a ridiculous way to live. It really is. And, as has also been pointed out to me recently, it's a way that doesn't seem to hold much of a future for me, assigned as I am to a low-ranking ambassador who has had to fight her way to the sorts of missions that more exalted diplomats would turn down as a waste of their talents and abilities. It does make you wonder why I do it. Why I *have* done it.

"And then I remember why I do it. Because as strange, and exhausting, and enervating, and, yes, even humiliating as it can be, at the end of the day, when everything goes right, it's the most exciting thing I've ever done. Ever. I stand there and I can't believe that I've been part of a group who meets with people who are not human but can still reason, and that we've reasoned together, and through that reason have agreed to live together, without killing each other or demanding more of the other than what each of us needs from the other.

"And it's happening at a time in our history that's never been more critical to humanity. We are out here, all of us, without the sort of protection and growth that Earth has always provided us before. And because of that, every negotiation, every agreement, every action we take—even those of us on the bottom rung of the diplomatic service—makes a difference for the future of humanity. For the future of this planet and every planet like it. For the future of everyone at this table.

"I love all of you. Dad, I love your dedication to Phoenix and your desire to keep it running. Mom, I love that you care for each of us, even when you snipe at us a little. Brandt, I love your ambition and drive. Catherine, I love the fact that one day you will rule us all. Wes, I love

that you are the family jester, who keeps us honest. I love you and your wives and husbands and your children. I love Magda and Brous and Lisa, who have lived their lives with us.

"I was told recently by someone that if I wanted to make a difference, that this must be the place. Here, on Phoenix. With love and respect, I disagree. Dad, Brandt and Catherine will take care of Phoenix for us. My job is to take care of the rest of it. That's what I do. That's what I'm going to keep doing. That's where what I do matters.

"So to each of you, my family, a toast. Keep Phoenix safe for me. I'll work on everything else. When I come back for Harvest Day next year, I'll let you know how it's going. That's a promise. Cheers."

Hart drank. Everyone drank but Alastair, who waited until he caught his son's eye. Then he raised his glass a second time and drank.

"That was worth holding off on the potatoes for," Wes said. "Now pass me the gravy, please."

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EPISODE ELEVEN

A Problem of Proportion

Captain Sophia Coloma's first thought at registering the missile bearing down on the *Clarke* was, *This again*. Her second was to yell at Helmsman Cabot for evasive action. Cabot responded admirably, slamming the ship into avoidance mode and launching the ship's countermeasures. The *Clarke* groaned at the sudden change of vector; the artificial gravity indulged a moment where it felt as if the field would snap and every unsecured object on the *Clarke* would launch toward the top bulkheads at a couple hundred kilometers an hour.

The gravity held, the ship dove in physical space and the countermeasures dazzled the missile into missing its quarry. It blasted past the *Clarke* and immediately began searching for its target as it did.

"The missile is Acke make," Cabot said, reading the data on his console. "The *Clarke*'s got its transmitter in memory. Unless they've changed it up, we can keep it confused."

"Two more missiles launched and targeting," Executive Officer Neva Balla said. "Impact in sixty-three seconds."

"Same make," Cabot said. "Jamming them now."

"Which ship is shooting at us?" Coloma asked.

"It's the smaller one," Balla said.

"What's the other one doing?" Coloma asked.

"Firing on the first ship," Balla said.

Coloma pulled up a tactical image on her console. The smaller ship, a long needle with a bulbous engine compartment far aft and a smaller

bulb forward, remained a mystery to the *Clarke*'s computer. The larger ship, however, resolved to the *Nurimal,* a frigate of Lalan manufacture.

A Conclave warship, in other words.

Damn it, Coloma thought. *We fell right into the trap.*

"These new missiles aren't responding to jamming," Cabot said.

"Evade," Coloma said.

"They're tracking our moves," Cabot said. "They're going to hit."

"That frigate is moving its port beam guns," Coloma said. "They're swinging our way."

The Conclave thought that other ship was us, Coloma thought. *Fired on it, it fired back. When we showed up, it fired on us as a matter of defense.*

Now the *Nurimal* knew who the real enemy was and wasn't wasting any time dealing with it.

So much for diplomacy, Coloma thought. *Next life, I'm getting a ship with guns.*

The *Nurimal* fired its particle beam weapons. Focused, high-energy beams lanced forward and tunneled into their targets.

The missiles heading for the *Clarke* exploded kilometers out from the ship. The first missile, now wandering aimlessly nearly a hundred klicks from the *Clarke,* was vaporized mere seconds thereafter.

"That … was not what I was expecting," Balla said.

The *Nurimal* swung its beam weapons around, focusing them on the third ship, lancing that ship's engine pod. The ship's engines shattered, severing from the ship proper. The forward portions of the ship went dark, power lost, and began spinning with the angular momentum gained by the force of the engine compartment eruption.

"Is it dead?" Coloma asked.

"It's not firing at us anymore, at least," said Cabot.

"I'll take that," Coloma said.

"The *Clarke*'s identified the other ship," Balla said.

"It's the *Nurimal,*" Coloma said. "I know."

"Not that one, ma'am," Balla said. "The one it just wrecked. It's the *Urse Damay*. It's an Easo corvette that was turned over to Conclave diplomatic service."

"What the hell is it doing firing on us?" Cabot asked.

"And why is the *Nurimal* firing on it?" said Coloma.

"Captain," Orapan Juntasa, the communications and alarm officer, said. "We're being hailed by the *Nurimal*. The person hailing us says they are the captain." Juntasa was silent for a moment, listening. Her eyes got wide.

"What is it?" Coloma asked.

"They say they want to surrender to us," Juntasa said. "To *you*."

Coloma was silent for a minute at this.

"Ma'am?" Juntasa said. "What do I tell the *Nurimal*?"

"Tell them we've received their message and to please wait," Coloma said. She turned to Balla. "Get Ambassador Abumwe up here right now. She's the reason we're here in the first place. And bring Lieutenant Wilson, too. He's actual military. I don't know if I can accept a surrender. I'm pretty sure *he* can."

• • •

Hafte Sorvalh was tall, tall even for a Lalan, and as such would have difficulty navigating the short and narrow corridors of the *Clarke*. As a courtesy to her, the negotiations for the surrender of the *Nurimal* were held in the *Clarke* shuttle bay. Sorvalh was accompanied by Puslan Fotew, captain of the *Nurimal,* who did not appear in the least bit pleased to be on the *Clarke,* and Muhtal Worl, Sorvalh's assistant. On the human side were Coloma, Abumwe, Wilson and Hart Schmidt, whom Wilson had requested and Abumwe had acceded to. They were arrayed at a table hastily acquired from the officers mess. Chairs were provided for all; Wilson guessed they might be of slightly less utility for the Lalans, based on their physiology.

"We have an interesting situation before us," Hafte Sorvalh said, to the humans. Her words were translated by a small machine she wore as

a brooch. "One of you is the captain of this ship. One of you is the head of this ship's diplomatic mission. One of you"—she nodded at Wilson—"is a member of the Colonial Union's military. To whom shall my captain here surrender?"

Coloma and Abumwe looked over to Wilson, who nodded. "I am Lieutenant Wilson of the Colonial Defense Forces," he said. "Captain Coloma and Ambassador Abumwe are members of the Colonial Union's civil government, as is Mr. Schmidt here." He nodded at his friend. "The *Nurimal* is a Conclave military ship, so we have decided that as a matter of protocol, I would be the person for whom it would be appropriate to surrender."

"Only a lieutenant?" Sorvalh said. Wilson, who was not an expert on Lalan physiology, nevertheless suspected she was wearing an amused expression. "I'm afraid it might be a little embarrassing for my captain to surrender to someone of your rank."

"I sympathize," Wilson said, and then went off script. "And if I may, Ambassador Sorvalh—"

"Councillor Sorvalh would be more accurate, Lieutenant," Sorvalh said.

"If I may, Councillor Sorvalh," Wilson corrected, "I would ask why your captain seeks to surrender at all. The *Nurimal* clearly outmatches the *Clarke* militarily. If you wished it, you could blow us right out of the sky."

"Which is precisely why I ordered Captain Fotew to surrender her vessel to you," Sorvalh said. "To assure you that we pose not the smallest threat to you."

Wilson glanced over to Captain Fotew, rigid and formal. The fact that she was ordered to surrender explained a lot, about both Fotew's attitude at the moment and the relationship between Fotew and Sorvalh. Wilson could not see Captain Coloma accepting an order from Ambassador Abumwe to surrender her ship; there might be blood on the floor after such a request. "You could have made that point much

more clear if you had not housed your diplomatic mission to us in a warship," Wilson pointed out.

"Ah, but if we had done that, you would be dead," Sorvalh said.

Fair point, Wilson thought. "The *Urse Damay* is a Conclave ship," he said.

"It was," Sorvalh said. "Technically, I suppose it still may be. Nevertheless, when it attacked your ship—and also the *Nurimal*—it was under the command of neither the Conclave nor its military, nor was it crewed by citizens of the Conclave."

"What proof do you offer for this assertion?" Wilson asked.

"At the moment, none," Sorvalh said. "As I have none to offer. That may come in the future, as these discussions progress. In the meantime, you have my word, whatever that will be worth to you at the moment."

Wilson glanced over to Abumwe, who gave him a small nod. He turned to Captain Fotew. "With all due respect, Captain, I cannot accept your surrender," he said. "The Colonial Union and the Conclave are not in a state of war, and your military actions, as best I can see, were at no point directed toward the *Clarke* specifically nor at the Colonial Union generally. Indeed, your actions and the actions of your crew saved the *Clarke* and the lives of its crew and passengers. So while I reject your surrender, I offer you my thanks."

Fotew stood there a moment, blinking. "Thank you, Lieutenant," she said, finally. "I accept your thanks and will share it with my crew."

"Very well done," Sorvalh said, to Wilson. She turned to Abumwe. "For a military officer, he's not a bad diplomat."

"He has his moments, Councillor," Abumwe said.

"If I may, what are we doing about the *Urse Damay*?" Coloma said. "It's damaged, but it's not entirely dead. It still represents a threat to both our ships."

Sorvalh nodded to Fotew, who addressed Coloma. "The *Urse Damay* had missile launchers bolted on to it, holding nine missiles," she said. "Three of them were sent at you. Three of them were sent at us. The remaining three have our weapons trained on them. If they were

fired, they would be destroyed before they were launched out of their tubes. That is if the *Urse Damy* had enough power to target either of our ships or fire the missiles at all."

"Have you made contact with the ship?" Coloma asked.

"We ordered its surrender and offered to rescue its crew," Fotew said. "We have heard nothing from it since our battle. We have done nothing else pending our surrender to you."

"If Lieutenant Wilson had accepted our surrender, then it would have been you who would have to coordinate the rescue," Sorvalh said.

"If there were someone still alive on that ship, they would have signaled us by now," Fotew said. "Us or you. The *Urse Damay* is dead, Captain."

Coloma quieted, dissatisfied.

"How will you explain this incident?" Abumwe asked Sorvalh.

"How do you mean?" Sorvalh replied.

"I mean each of our governments have agreed that this discussion of ours is not actually taking place," Abumwe said. "If even a discussion is not taking place, I would imagine an actual military battle will be hard to explain."

"The military battle will not be hard to handle politically," Sorvalh said. "The surrender, however, would have been difficult to explain away. Another reason for us to be grateful of the politic choices of your Lieutenant Wilson here."

"If you are so grateful, then perhaps you can give us the answer we came here to get," Abumwe said.

"What answer is that?" Sorvalh said.

"Why the Conclave is targeting and attacking Colonial Union ships," Abumwe said.

"How very interesting," Sorvalh said. "Because we have the very same question for you, about our ships."

• • •

“There have been sixteen ships gone missing in the last year,” Colonel Abel Rigney explained to Abumwe. He and Abumwe were in the office of Colonel Liz Egan, who sat with them at her office’s conference table. “Ten of them in the last four months.”

“What do you mean by ‘gone missing’?” Abumwe asked. “Destroyed?”

“No, just gone,” Rigney said. “As in, once they skipped they were never heard from again. No black boxes, no skip drones, no communication of any sort.”

“And no debris?” Abumwe asked.

“None that we could find, and no gas clouds of highly vaporized ships, either,” Egan said. “Nothing but space.”

Abumwe turned her attention back to Rigney. “These were Colonial Defense Forces ships?”

“No,” Rigney said. “Or more accurately, not anymore. The ships that have disappeared were all decommissioned former CDF ships, repurposed for civilian uses. Like the *Clarke,* your ship, was formerly a CDF corvette. Once a ship outlives its usefulness to the CDF, we sell them to individual colonies for local government services, or to commercial concerns who specialize in intercolonial shipping.”

“The fact that they were nonmilitary is why we originally didn’t notice,” Egan said. “Civilian and commercial ships sometimes go missing just as a matter of course. A skip is improperly inputted, or they’re prey for raiders or pirates, or they’re employed to carry a wildcat colony someplace a wildcat colony shouldn’t be and they get shot up. The Colonial Union tracks all legal shipping and travel in Colonial space, so we note when a ship is destroyed or goes missing. But we don’t necessarily note what kind of ship it is, or in this case *was*.”

“It wasn’t until some nerd handling ship registrations noted that a specific type of ship was going missing that we paid attention,” Rigney said. “And sure enough, he was right. All the ships on this list are decommissioned frigates or corvettes. All of them were

decommissioned in the last five years. Most of them disappeared in systems near Conclave territory."

Abumwe frowned. "That doesn't sound like the Conclave's way of doing things," she said. "They won't let us colonize anymore, but beyond that they haven't recently been openly antagonistic towards the Colonial Union. They don't *need* to be."

"We agree," Egan said. "But there are reasons for the Conclave to want to attack the Colonial Union. They are massively larger than we are, but we still nearly managed to destroy them not all that long ago."

Abumwe nodded. She remembered the CDF destruction of the Conclave fleet over Roanoke Colony and how that pushed the entire Colonial Union to the brink of war with the much larger, much angrier alien confederation.

What saved the Colonial Union, ironically enough, had been the fact that the Conclave's leader and founder, General Tarsem Gau, had managed to quell a rebellion and keep the Conclave intact—a not exactly small irony considering the CDF's goal was to topple Gau.

"Gau certainly has reasons for wanting the Colonial Union out of the picture," Abumwe said. "I'm not sure how making a few decommissioned former warships disappear will accomplish that."

"We're not sure about it ourselves," Rigney said. "The ships are useless as warships now; we've removed all weapons and defense systems. The ships couldn't have been confused with CDF ships still in service. Making them disappear does nothing to reduce our military capability at all."

"There's another possibility," Egan said. "One I think is more likely, personally. And that is that the Conclave isn't behind the disappearances at all. Someone else is, and trying to make it look like it's the Conclave in the hopes of pushing them and us into another conflict."

"All right," Abumwe said. "Explain what this has to do with me."

"We need to establish a back channel to the Conclave about this," Rigney said. "If they are behind it, we need to tell them that we won't

tolerate it, in a way that doesn't let our other enemies know where our military resources might become focused. If they aren't behind it, then it's to our mutual benefit to discover who is—again, as quietly as possible."

"You're getting the job because, to be blunt about it, you already know that someone or some group has been trying to sabotage the Colonial Union's dealings with other species and governments," Egan said. "We don't need to read you in, and we know you and your people can keep your mouths shut."

Abumwe gave a wry half smile. "I appreciate your candor," she said.

"You are also good at what you do," Egan said. "To be clear. But discretion is of particular value in this case."

"I understand," Abumwe said. "How do you want me to approach the task? I don't have any direct contacts with the Conclave, but I know someone who might."

"Your Lieutenant Wilson?" Egan said.

Abumwe nodded. "He knows John Perry personally," she said, naming the former CDF major who took refuge with the Conclave after the events of Roanoke Colony and then took an alien trade fleet to Earth and informed that planet of their lopsided relationship with the Colonial Union. "It's not a connection I'm keen on exploiting, but it's one I can use if necessary."

"It won't be necessary," Rigney said. "We have a direct line to one of General Gau's inner circle. A councillor named Sorvalh."

"How do we know Sorvalh?" Abumwe asked.

"After the unpleasantness with Major Perry showing up over Earth with a Conclave trade fleet, General Gau decided it would be useful to have an official unofficial way for us to talk to his inner circle," Egan said. "To avoid any *unintentional* unpleasantness."

"If we tell her where to show up, she'll be there," Rigney said. "We just need to get you there."

"And make sure that no one else knows you're coming," said Egan.

• • •

"We're not attacking any of your ships," Abumwe said, to Sorvalh.

"Curious," Sorvalh said. "Because in the past several of your months, we have had twenty ships up and disappear."

"Conclave military ships?" Abumwe asked.

"No," Sorvalh said. "Mostly merchant ships and a few repurposed ships."

"Go on," Abumwe said.

"There's not much more to say," Sorvalh said. "All of them were lost in territory that borders Colonial Union space. All of them disappeared without evidence. Ships, gone. Crews, gone. Cargo, gone. Too few ships to constitute an action which merited a response. Too many to just chalk up to chance or fate."

"And you've had none of these ships reappear," Abumwe asked.

"There is one," Sorvalh said. "It's the *Urse Damay*."

"You're joking," Wilson said.

"No, Lieutenant Wilson," Sorvalh said, turning to him. "The *Urse Damay* was one of the first on the list to go, and one that gave us the greatest amount of worry. It's a diplomatic ship, or was, and its disappearance was a possible act of war as far as we were concerned. But we didn't pick up any chatter in our usual channels about it, and for something like this, we would."

"Yet you still think we're behind this," Abumwe said.

"If we were certain, then you would have heard from us already, and not through a diplomatic back channel," Sorvalh said. "We have our suspicions, but we also have no interest in starting a war with the Colonial Union over suspicions. Just as, obviously, you have no desire to start a war with us over your suspicions, either."

"The *Urse Damay* being here should convince you that it's not us who took it," Coloma said. "It fired on us."

"It fired on both of our ships," Captain Fotew said. "And on ours first. We arrived here just before you did. It was here when we arrived."

"If we had arrived first, we would have seen it as a Conclave diplomatic ship," Coloma said. "It's obvious that it was meant to lure the *Clarke* and then attack us."

"That's one way of looking at it," Sorvalh said. "Another way is to have your tame, captured Conclave ship fake an attack on an unarmed diplomatic ship and use that as a propaganda tool. It's not as if the Colonial Union is above sacrificing a ship or a colony to whip up some righteous anger."

Coloma stiffened at this; Abumwe reached over and took her arm to calm and caution her. "You're not actually suggesting this is the case here."

"I am not," Sorvalh agreed. "I am pointing out that we both have more questions than answers at the moment. Our ship went missing. It's shown up here. It's attacked both of our ships. Who was the *intended* target is, at the moment, a trivial question because we both ended up as targets. The question we should be asking is, who is targeting us both? How did they know we would be here? And are they the same people who have caused *your* ships to disappear?"

Wilson turned back to Fotew. "You say that the *Urse Damay* is dead."

"Incapacitated at the very least," Fotew said. "And not a threat in any event."

"Then I have a suggestion," Wilson said.

"Please," Sorvalh said.

"I think it might be time for a joint field trip," Wilson said.

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"Don't do anything fancy," Hart Schmidt said to Wilson. The two of them were in the *Clarke* shuttle bay. The *Nurimal*'s shuttle, with its pilot and two Conclave military, was waiting for Wilson to board. "Look around, see what you can find out, get out of there."

"I want to know when it was you became my mother," Wilson said.

"You keep doing crazy things," Schmidt said. "And then you keep roping me into them with you."

"Someone else can monitor me if you want," Wilson said.

"Don't be stupid, Harry," Schmidt said. He checked Wilson's combat suit a second time. "You've checked your oxygen supply."

"It's being constantly monitored by my BrainPal," Wilson said. "Plus the combat suit is configured for a vacuum environment. Plus I can hold my breath for ten minutes at a time. Please, Hart. You're my friend, but I'm going to have to kill you."

"All right. Sorry," Schmidt said. "I'll be following you from the bridge. Keep your audio and visual circuits open. Coloma and Abumwe will be there, too, if you have any questions for them and vice versa."

"Just who I want in my head," Wilson said.

One of the Conclave soldiers, a Lalan, poked his head out of the shuttle and motioned to Wilson. "That's my ride," he said.

Schmidt peered at the soldier. "Watch out for these guys," he said.

"They're not going to kill me, Hart," Wilson said. "That would look bad."

"One day you're going to be wrong about these things," Schmidt said.

"When I am, hope that I'm very far away from you," Wilson said. Schmidt grinned at this and headed back to the shuttle bay control room.

Wilson entered the shuttle. The pilot and one of the soldiers were Lalan, like Sorvalh and Captain Fotew. The other was a Fflict, a squat, hairy race. It motioned to Wilson to have a seat. He did and stowed his MP-35 beneath his feet.

"We have translation circuits built into our suits," the Fflict said, in its own language, while a translation came through a speaker on its belt. "You can speak your language and we'll get a translation through our audio feed."

"Likewise," Wilson said, and pointed to the speaker. "You can turn that off if you like. I'll still be able to understand you just fine."

"Good," the Fflict said, and turned off the speaker. "I hate the way that thing makes me sound." It held up a hand and contracted the appendages twice, in a greeting. "I'm Lieutenant Navill Werd." It pointed toward the Lalans. "Pilot Urgrn Howel, Corporal Lesl Carn."

"Lieutenant Harry Wilson," Wilson said.

"Have you been in a vacuum environment before?" Werd asked.

"Once or twice," Wilson said.

"Good," Werd said. "Now, listen. This is a joint mission, but someone has to be in charge, and I'm going to propose that it's me, on account that I'm already supposed to be in charge of these two, and it's my shuttle besides. Any objection?"

Wilson grinned. "No, sir."

"Wrong gender," Werd said. "But your 'ma'am' doesn't exactly work either, so you might as well keep calling me 'sir.' No need to make things complicated."

"Yes, sir," Wilson said.

"Right, let's get this thing moving," Werd said, then turned to nod at his pilot. The pilot zipped up the shuttle and signaled to the *Clarke* that they were ready to depart; the *Clarke* started the purge cycle for the bay. Corporal Carn eased himself into the co-pilot's seat.

"This is my first time working with a human," Werd said, to Wilson.

"How's it going so far?" Wilson asked.

"Not bad," Werd said. "You're kind of ugly, though."

"I get that a lot," Wilson said.

"I bet you do," Werd said. "I won't hold it against you."

"Thanks," Wilson said.

"But if you smell, I'm pushing you out an airlock," Werd said.

"Got it," Wilson said.

"Glad we've come to this understanding," Werd said.

"The lieutenant is like this with everyone," Corporal Carn said, looking back at Wilson. "It's not just you."

"It's not my fault everyone else is hideous to look at," Werd said. "You can't all be gorgeous like me."

"How do you even get through the day being as gorgeous as you are, sir?" Wilson asked.

"I really don't know," Werd said. "Just by being a beacon of hope and good looks, I suppose."

"You see what I'm saying here," Carn said.

"He's just jealous," Werd said. "And ugly."

"You guys are a hoot," Wilson said. "And here my friend Hart thought you might try to kill me."

"Of course not," Werd said. "We save that for the second mission."

The shuttle backed out of the bay and headed to the *Urse Damay*.

• • •

"All right, who wants to tell me the weird thing about this ship?" Werd said, to no one in particular. The lieutenant's voice came in through Wilson's BrainPal; he, Werd and Carn were all in separate parts of the ship.

"The fact there's not a single living thing on it?" Carn said.

"Close, but no," Werd said.

"That's *not* the weird thing?" Carn said. "If that's not the weird thing, Lieutenant, what is?"

"The fact there's no evidence that a single living thing was ever on it," Wilson said.

"The human gets it," Werd said. "This is the strangest damn thing I have ever seen."

The three soldiers had carefully navigated themselves over to the tumbling front end of the *Urse Damay*. The shuttle pilot had matched the spin and rotation of the ship fragment, and the three traversed across by way of a guide line attached to a magnetic harpoon. Once

they were over, the shuttle backed off to a less dangerous distance while continuing to match the tumble.

Inside, the tumble was enough to stick Wilson, Werd and Carn to the bulkheads at crazy angles to the ship's internal layout. The three of them had to be careful when they walked; the open communication channel was occasionally punctuated by the very tall Corporal Carn cursing as he bumped into something.

The front end of the *Urse Damay* had been severed from its prime power source, but emergency power was still being drawn from local batteries; emergency lighting flooded the corridors with a dim but serviceable glow. The glow showed no indication that anyone had walked the corridors in the recent past. Wilson pulled open doors to living quarters, conference rooms and what appeared to be a mess hall, judging from the benches and what looked to be food preparation areas.

They were all empty and sterile.

"Is this ship programmed?" asked Carn. "Like a skip drone?"

"I saw the video replay of its battle with the *Nurimal,*" Werd said. "The *Urse Damay* was using tactics that suggest more than just programming, at least to me."

"I agree with that," Wilson said. "It sure looked like someone was here."

"Maybe it's remotely controlled," Carn said.

"We've swept the local area," Wilson said. "We didn't find any drones or smaller ships. I'm sure Captain Fotew had the *Nurimal* do the same thing."

"Then how did this ship fight with no one on it?" Carn asked.

"How do we feel about ghosts?" Werd said.

"I prefer my dead to stay dead," Wilson said.

"The human gets it right again," Werd said. "So we keep looking for something living on the ship."

A few minutes later, Carn was on the open channel. He made a noise; after a second, Wilson's BrainPal translated it to "uh."

"What is it?" Werd asked.

"I think I found something," Carn said.

"Is it alive?" Wilson asked.

"Maybe?" Carn said.

"Carn, you're going to have to be more specific than that," Werd said. Even through the translation, Wilson could hear the exasperation.

"I'm on the bridge," Carn said. "There's no one here. But there's a screen that's on."

"All right," Werd said. "So what?"

"So when I passed by the screen, words came up on it," Carn said.

"What did they say?" Wilson asked.

"'Come back,'" Carn said.

"I thought you said there was no one in the room with you," Werd said.

"There's *not,*" Carn said. "Hold on, there's something new on the screen now. More words."

"What's it say this time?" Werd asked.

"'Help me,'" Carn said.

• • •

"You said you had expertise with technology," Werd said to Wilson, and pointed to the bridge screen, hovering at an off-kilter angle above them. "Make this thing work."

Wilson grimaced and looked at the screen. The words on the screen were in Lalan; a visual overlay from his BrainPal translated the message. There was no keyboard or operating tool that Wilson could see. He reached up and tapped the screen; nothing. "How do you usually work your screens?" Wilson asked Werd. "Does the Conclave have some sort of standard access interface?"

"I lead people and shoot at things," Werd said. "Access interfaces aren't my thing."

"We have a standard data transmission band," Carn said. "Not the voice transmission band, but for other things."

"Hart?" Wilson said.

"Getting that for you now," Schmidt said, in his head.

"Look," Carn said, pointing at the screen. "New words."

You don't need the data band, the words said in Lalan. *I can hear you on the audio band. But I only understand the Lalan. My translation module is damaged.*

"What language do you speak?" Wilson said, and ordered his BrainPal to translate in Lalan.

Easo, the words said.

Wilson queried his BrainPal, which had the language and began to unpack it. "Is that better?" he asked.

Yes, thank you, the words said.

"Who are you?" Wilson asked.

My name is Rayth Ablant.

"Are you the captain of the *Urse Damay*?" Wilson asked.

In a manner of speaking, yes.

"Why did you attack the *Clarke* and *Nurimal*?" Wilson asked.

I had no choice in the matter.

"Where is everyone?" asked Werd, who apparently had Easo as part of his translation database.

You mean, where is my crew.

"Yes," Werd said.

I have none. It's just me.

"Where are you?" Wilson asked.

That's an interesting question, the words said.

"Are you on the ship?" Wilson asked.

I am the ship.

"I heard that correctly, right?" Carn said, after a minute. "I didn't just get a bad translation, did I?"

"We're asking the same question over here," Schimdt said to Wilson, although he was the only one on the *Urse Damay* who could hear him.

"You *are* the ship," Wilson repeated.

Yes.

"That's not possible," Werd said.

I wish you were right about that.

"Lieutenant Werd is right," Wilson said. "None of us have been able to create truly intelligent machines."

I never said I was a machine.

"This guy is making me irritated," Werd said, to Wilson. "He's speaking in riddles."

"And he can hear you," Wilson said, making a chopping motion: *Werd, shut up.* "Rayth Ablant, you're going to need to explain yourself better for us. I don't think any of us understand what you're saying."

It's easier to show you.

"All right," Wilson said. "Show me."

Look behind you.

Wilson did. Behind him was a line of displays and a large, black cabinet. He turned back to the display.

Open it. Carefully.

Wilson did.

Hello.

"Oh, fuck me," Wilson said.

• • •

"He's a brain in a box," Wilson said. "Literally a brain in a box. I opened up the cabinet and there's a container in there with an Easo brain and nervous system laid out and connected to non-organic data fibers. There's some sort of liquid surrounding the brain, which I suspect is keeping it oxygenated and fed. There's an outtake tube that connects to what looks like a filtering mechanism, with another tube coming out the other end. It all gets recycled. It's pretty impressive, as long as you forget that there's an actual sentient being trapped in there."

Wilson sat once more in the *Clarke* shuttle bay with Abumwe, Sorvalh, Muhtal Worl and Hart Schmidt. Captains Coloma and Fotew

had returned to their posts. Abumwe and Coloma had seen Rayth Ablant from Wilson's own point of view through his BrainPal feed, but Sorvalh wanted a report as well. Wilson offered her his BrainPal feed, but she refused, preferring, as she said, "a live recounting."

"Who was this Ablant?" Sorvalh asked. "He had a life before … this."

"He was a pilot on the *Urse Damay,* or so he says," Wilson said. "You would be able to check that better than I would, Councillor."

Sorvalh nodded to Worl, who made a note on his tablet computer. "He was part of a crew," Sorvalh said. "The *Urse Damay* had a core crew of fifty and a diplomatic mission party of a dozen. What happened to them?"

"He says he doesn't know," Wilson said. "He says he had been asleep when the *Urse Damay* was first boarded and that he was knocked unconscious during the invasion. When he woke up he was like this. The people who did this to him didn't tell him anything about the rest of his crew."

"And who are they, the people who did this to him?" Sorvalh asked.

"He says he doesn't know that, either," Wilson said. "He says he's never even technically spoken with them. They communicate with him through text. When he came to, they explained to him his job was to learn how to operate and navigate the *Urse Damay* on his own and that when he became proficient enough, he would be given a mission. This was that mission."

"Do you believe he doesn't know who these people are?" Sorvalh asked Wilson.

"Pardon my French, Councillor, but the guy is a fucking disembodied brain," Wilson said. "It's not like he has any powers of observation other than what they gave him. He says they didn't even give him external inputs until after the ship skipped. He was flying blind for the first half of his mission. It's entirely possible he knows

nothing about these people but what they tell him, which is almost nothing."

"You trust him," Sorvalh said.

"I *pity* him," Wilson said. "But I also think he's credible. If he was a willing participant in this, they wouldn't need to put his brain in a box to get him to do what they want him to do."

"Tell the councillor what he was told his payment would be for this mission," Abumwe said to Wilson.

"They told him that if he did this mission, they'd put his brain back into his body and send him home," Wilson said. "His payment would be that he gets to be himself again."

Sorvalh was silent about this for a moment, contemplating. Then she shifted her body weight and addressed Abumwe. "I would ask your indulgence for a moment while I say something terribly blunt."

"Be my guest," Abumwe said.

"It's no great secret that the Colonial Union does things like this all the time," Sorvalh said. She motioned at Wilson. "Your lieutenant here is the result of consciousness allegedly being transferred from one body to another genetically-modified one. He has a computer in his brain which connects to it using inorganic connections that are at least functionally similar to what's connected to this poor creature. Your special forces soldiers are even more modified than he is. We know that you have some special forces soldiers who only tangentially resemble human beings. And we know that one penalty option your Colonial Defense Forces has for its malfeasant soldiers is to place their brains in a container for a period of time."

Abumwe nodded and said, "Your point, Councillor."

"My point, Ambassador, is that whoever did this to Rayth Ablant, their mode of operation is closer to that of the Colonial Union than it is to the Conclave," Sorvalh said.

Abumwe nodded at Wilson again. "Tell her Rayth Ablant's orders," she said.

"He says his orders were to destroy any and all ships that presented themselves after he skipped," Wilson said. "There was no discrimination on the part of his masters. They just pointed him at both of us and hoped for the best."

"To what end?" Sorvalh said.

"Does it matter?" Abumwe said. "If we had been destroyed, the Colonial Union would have blamed you for the ambush. If you had been destroyed, the Conclave would have done the same to us. If we had both been destroyed, our two governments might already be at war. It's as you said earlier, Councillor. At this point, the *why* is almost trivial, unless we know the *who*."

"If your Lieutenant Wilson is correct, and this Rayth Ablant has no way of knowing for whom he works, there's no way for us to know the *who,*" Sorvalh said. "All we have to go on are methods, and these methods are closer to yours than ours."

"Rayth Ablant doesn't know who he's working for, but he's not all we have," Wilson said.

"Explain," Sorvalh said.

"He's a brain in a box," Wilson repeated. "And the *box* can tell us a lot of things. Like whose technology it's made out of. If there's anything off the shelf about the thing, then that's a lead to follow. Even if everything is custom-made, we can reverse-engineer it and maybe find out what it's closest to. It's better than what we have now, which is nothing."

"What will that require?" Sorvalh asked.

"Well, for one thing, I want to take Rayth Ablant off the *Urse Damay,*" Wilson said. "The sooner the better. We have a ticking clock here."

"I don't understand," Sorvalh said.

"One of the first things Rayth Ablant said to us was 'help me,'" Wilson said. "He said that because his life support is running off the emergency power batteries. He's got about eight hours left before he exhausts the power supply."

"And you want to bring him here," Sorvalh said, indicating the *Clarke*.

Wilson shook his head. "He's on a Conclave ship," he said. "Wherever the box comes from, it's interfaced with a Conclave power network. Your power systems on the *Nurimal* more closely match those of the *Urse Damay* than ours do." Wilson smiled. "And besides, you have the guns."

Sorvalh returned the smile. "That we do, Lieutenant," she said. "But I can't imagine your boss here will be happy with the Conclave taking possession of that technology."

"As long as you allow Lieutenant Wilson to closely examine the technology, I have no real objection," Abumwe said. "Technology is his job. I trust him to learn what he needs to know."

"Your bosses might not be happy with that, Ambassador Abumwe," Sorvalh said.

"This may be true," Abumwe said. "But that's going to be my problem, not yours."

"When can you get started?" Sorvalh asked Wilson.

"As soon as you requisition Werd and Carn to help me again," Wilson said. "The brain box is not too large, fortunately, but the environment in there makes it difficult to move. And the shuttle for transport, obviously."

Sorvalh nodded to her assistant, who reached again for his tablet computer. "Anything else?" she asked.

"I do have one request," Wilson said.

"Name it," Sorvalh said.

"I'd like you to promise me that once you get Rayth Ablant on your ship, that you connect him to your network," Wilson said.

"And your reason for that is?" Sorvalh asked.

"This poor bastard has spent the last God knows how long running starship operation simulations. All his friends are dead and he's been talking to no one except the sons of bitches who put him in that box," Wilson said. "I think he's probably lonely."

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Do you mind if I ask you a question, Rayth Ablant said to Wilson. Wilson had opened the data band so that Rayth Ablant could address him directly through his BrainPal rather than through the display. He kept the text interface, however, because it seemed right.

"Go right ahead," Wilson said. He was busy extracting batteries from underneath the deck of the *Urse Damay*'s bridge and was beginning to sweat inside his vacuum-proof combat suit.

I'd like to know why you're trying to help me.

"You asked for help," Wilson said.

I also tried to blow up your ship with you in it.

"That was before you knew me," Wilson said.

I'm sorry about that.

"I'm not going to tell you not to be sorry," Wilson said, "but I can understand wanting to get your body back."

That's not going to happen now.

"Not through the assholes who did this to you, no," Wilson said. "It's not to say it couldn't happen one day."

It doesn't seem likely.

"You're saying that to a guy who is on his second body," Wilson said. "I'm a little more optimistic about your plight than you are." He hauled out a battery and placed it next to the several others he had extracted. Werd and Carn were elsewhere in the *Urse Damay,* pulling out batteries of their own. They would serve as the power source for Rayth Ablant's brain box until they were all safely on the *Nurimal*. The trip from the *Urse Damay* to the *Nurimal* would be a matter of a couple of minutes, but Wilson was a big believer in overkill when the downside was someone ending up dead.

Thank you for this.

"Thank you for being a terrible shot," Wilson said. He returned to his task.

You know humans have a bad reputation. Among the rest of us.

"I've heard," Wilson said.

That you're deceptive. That you'll go against your contracts and treaties. That you're terrified of all of us and your way of solving that problem is trying to destroy us all.

"But on the bright side, we all have lovely singing voices," Wilson said.

I'm telling you this because I'm not seeing any of this in you.

"Humans are like anyone," Wilson said. "Is every Easo a good person? Before the Conclave, did your government always do the best thing? Does the Conclave always do the best things now?"

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to start a political discussion.

"You didn't," Wilson said. "I'm talking about the nature of sentient beings everywhere. We all have the entire range of possibilities inside of us. Personally, I don't expect much out of other people. But for myself, whenever possible, I try not to be a complete prick."

And that includes rescuing brains in boxes.

"Well, that includes rescuing a person," Wilson said. "Who at the moment happens to be a brain in a box." He hauled out another battery.

Lieutenant Werd came into the bridge, hauling his own supply of batteries, and set them down next to Wilson's. They jostled in the slight pseudogravity offered by the ship's tumbling. "How many more of these do you think you need?" he asked Wilson. "Dismantling an entire spaceship was not supposed to be in my job description."

Wilson smiled and counted the batteries. "I think we have enough," he said. "The box here is not that securely bolted into the deck, so we should be able to pull it out easily enough. Lifting things is in your job description, right?"

"Yes," Werd said. "But setting things down costs extra."

"Well, then," Wilson said, "what we have to do now is make sure there's no significant interruption in power flow to the box when we disconnect it from the *Urse Damay*'s system and attach it to the batteries." He pointed to the box's external outlets and the cords that

snaked from them into the ship's power system. "There's probably a buffer unit in the box itself. I need to see how much energy it stores."

"Whatever you say, Lieutenant Wilson," Werd said. "This time, you're in charge."

"Thank you, Werd," Wilson said, and opened the door to the box, again carefully, to avoid dislodging any part of the contents. "Between you, me and Carn, we're the very model of cooperation that suggests all of our nations may yet live in peace and harmony."

"Sarcasm is not exclusive to humans," Werd said, "but I will admit you do a good job with it."

Wilson said nothing to that. Instead he peered intently into the box.

"What is it?" Werd asked. Wilson motioned with his head that Werd should come closer. Werd did.

Wilson had separated a thick tangle of wires that plugged into the container holding Rayth Ablant's brain and nervous system to get a look at where the power cords entered the box. Where they entered was indeed what looked like a power buffer, to store a minute or so of energy to assist with an orderly system shutdown in case of loss of power.

There was something else attached to the power buffer as well.

"Ah," Werd said. Wilson nodded. "Carn," Werd said, into his communication circuit.

"Yes, Lieutenant," Carn said.

"Lieutenant Wilson and I realized we've forgotten some tools, and we're going to need you to come help us with them," Werd said. "Head back toward the shuttle. We'll meet you there."

"Sir?" Carn said, slightly confused.

"Acknowledge the order, Corporal," Werd said.

"Order acknowledged," Carn said. "On my way."

Is everything all right.

"Everything is fine," Wilson said, to Rayth Ablant. "I just realized some things in your internal structure here are going to be trickier to

deal with than others. I need some different tools. We need to go back to the *Nurimal* for them. We'll return momentarily."

Makes sense to me. Don't be gone too long. The ship is already beginning to shut down.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," Wilson said. "It's a promise."

Rayth Ablant said nothing. Wilson and Werd made their way silently to the shuttle rendezvous; they and Carn made their way back to the shuttlecraft without an additional word.

When the shuttlecraft was on its way, Wilson opened a channel to the *Clarke*. "Hart," he said, to Schmidt, "you need to get Abumwe over to *Nurimal*. Be there as soon as possible. We have a wrinkle. A really big damn wrinkle." He cut the connection before Schmidt could respond and turned to Werd. "I need you to get your people to get me a schematic of the *Urse Damay*'s power systems. There are things I need to know. Right now."

"We might not have them," Werd said. "The *Urse Damay*'s not part of the Conclave military fleet."

"Then I need one of your engineers to explain how Conclave power systems work. We can do that, at least, right?"

"I'm on it," Werd said, and opened up a channel to the *Nurimal*.

Carn looked at the two of them, saw their expressions. "What happened?" he asked.

"We're dealing with complete assholes," Wilson said.

"I thought we knew that," Carn said.

"No, this is new," Wilson said. "There's a bomb attached to the power supply on that box. The one Rayth Ablant is in. It looks like it's set to go off if anything happens to the power going into the box. If we move Rayth Ablant, he's going to die."

"If we don't move him, he's going to die," Carn said. "His power supply is running out."

"And now you know why I said we're dealing with complete assholes here," Wilson said. He was silent the rest of the way to the *Nurimal*.

• • •

It's just you this time.

"Yes," Wilson said to Rayth Ablant.

That's not a good sign, I think.

"I told you I would be back," Wilson said.

You're not going to lie to me, are you.

"You said you liked that I wasn't like the humans you had heard about," Wilson said. "So, no, I'm not going to lie to you. But you have to know that the truth is going to be hard to hear."

I am a brain in a box. The truth is already hard to hear.

Wilson smiled. "That's a very philosophical way of looking at things."

When you're a brain in a box, philosophy is what you have.

"There's a bomb in your box," Wilson said. "It's attached to the power buffer. As far as I can tell, it has a monitor that tracks power input. The *Urse Damay*'s power system is integrated with its emergency power systems so that when the first goes down, the second is already running and there's no interruption of power to critical systems, including your box. But if we remove your box from the system entirely, the monitor is going to register it, and the bomb will go off."

It would kill me.

"Yes," Wilson said. "Since you asked me not to lie, I'll tell you I suspect the real point of the bomb is to make sure the technology of that box you're in isn't taken and examined. Your death is an incidental result of that."

On second thought, maybe you can lie to me a little.

"Sorry," Wilson said.

Is there any way to remove me from the box?

"Not that I can see," Wilson said. "At least, not in a way that keeps you alive. The box is, if I may say so, an impressive piece of engineering. If I had more time, I could reverse-engineer the thing and

tell you how it works. I don't have that time. I could take you out of the box—the part that's actually you—but I couldn't just then take that part and hook it up to a battery. The box is an integrated system. You can't survive without it."

I'm not going to survive long in it, either.

"I can reattach the batteries we've removed from the system," Wilson said. "It can buy us some more time."

Us?

"I'm here," Wilson said. "I can keep working on this. There's probably something I've missed."

If you tinker with the bomb, then there's a chance you'll set it off.

"Yes," Wilson said.

And when the power goes out, the bomb will explode anyway.

"I imagine the bomb will use the energy in the buffer to set itself off, yes," Wilson said.

Do you dismantle bombs on a regular basis? Is this your specialty?

"I do technology research and development. This is up my alley," Wilson said.

I think this is you lying to me a little.

"I think I might be able to save you," Wilson said.

Why do you want to save me?

"You don't deserve to die like this," Wilson said. "As an afterthought. As a brain in a box. As less than fully yourself."

You said yourself this box is an impressive piece of technology. It looks like whoever did this took some effort to make sure it couldn't be taken. I don't want to insult you, but given that you've had only a very little amount of time with this box, do you really think you're going to find some way to outwit it and save me?

"I'm good at what I do," Wilson said.

If you were that good, you wouldn't be here. No offense.

"I'd like to try," Wilson said.

I would like you to try, if it didn't mean you possibly dying. One of us dying seems inevitable at this point. Both of us dying seems

avoidable.

"You asked us to help you," Wilson reminded Rayth Ablant.

You did. You tried. And even right now, if you wanted to keep trying, it's clear I couldn't stop you. But when I asked you to help, you helped. Now I am asking you to stop.

"All right," Wilson said, after a moment.

Thank you.

"What else can I do for you?" Wilson asked. "Do you have friends or family that you want us to contact? Do you have messages for anyone I can send for you?"

I have no real family. Most of my friends were on the Urse Damay. *Most of the people I know are already gone. I have no friends left.*

"That's not entirely true," Wilson said.

Are you volunteering yourself?

"I'd be happy if you considered me your friend," Wilson said.

I did try to kill you.

"That was before you knew me," Wilson repeated. "And now that you do, you've made it clear you won't let me die if you can help it. I think that makes up for your earlier indiscretions."

If you are my friend, then I have a request.

"Name it," Wilson said.

You are a soldier. You've killed before.

"It's not a point of pride," Wilson said. "But yes."

I'm going to die because people who don't care about me have used me and then thrown me away. I'd prefer to leave on my own terms.

"You want me to help you," Wilson said.

If you can. I'm not asking you to do it yourself. If this box is as sensitive as you say it is, if I die, the bomb could go off. I don't want you anywhere near when it does. But I think you could find another way.

"I imagine I could," Wilson said. "Or at the very least I could try."

For your trouble, let me offer you this.

There was a data ping on Wilson's BrainPal: an encrypted file, in a format he wasn't familiar with.

When I had completed my mission—when I had killed your ship and the Conclave ship—I was to feed this into the ship's guidance system. It's coordinates for my return trip. Maybe you'll find whoever's behind this there.

"Thank you," Wilson said. "That's incredibly helpful."

When you find them, blow them up a little for me.

Wilson grinned. "You got it," he said.

There's not much time before the emergency power is entirely used up.

"I'll have to leave you," Wilson said. "Which means that no matter what happens I'm not coming back."

I wouldn't want you here no matter what happens. You'll stay in contact with me?

"Yes, of course," Wilson said.

Then you should go now. And hurry, because there's not a lot of time left.

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"This isn't going to be a popular sentiment, but he's going to die anyway," said Captain Fotew. "We don't have to expend the effort."

"Are you suddenly on a budget, Captain?" Wilson asked. "Can the Conclave no longer afford a missile or a particle beam?" They were on the bridge of the *Nurimal,* along with Abumwe and Sorvalh.

"I said it wouldn't be a popular sentiment," Fotew said. "But someone ought to point it out, at least."

"Rayth Ablant has given us vital information about the whereabouts of the people directing him," Wilson said, and pointed toward the bridge's communications and science station, where the science officer was already busily attempting to crack the encryption on the orders. "He's been cooperative with us since our engagement with his ship."

"It's not as if he had much of a choice in that," Fotew said.

"Of course he had a choice," Wilson said. "If he hadn't signaled to Corporal Carn, we wouldn't know he was there. We wouldn't know that some organization out there is taking the Conclave's missing ships and turning them into glorified armed drones. We wouldn't know that whoever this group is, they're a threat to both the Conclave and the Colonial Union equally. And we wouldn't know that neither of our governments is engaging in a stealth war with the other."

"We still don't know that last one, Lieutenant Wilson," Sorvalh said. "Because we still don't know the *who*. We still don't know the players in this game."

"Not yet," Wilson said, motioning back to the science station. "But depending how good your code cracker is over there, this may be a temporary problem. And for the moment, at least, our governments are sharing information, since you've gotten that information from me."

"But this is a problem of proportion, isn't it?" Sorvalh said. "Is what we learn from you going to be worth everything we've expended to learn it? Is what we lose by granting Rayth Ablant his death more than we gain by, for example, what remains of his box when the explosion is over? There's still a lot we could learn from the debris."

Wilson looked over to Abumwe pleadingly. "Councillor," Abumwe said, "not too long ago you chose to surrender your vessel to us. Lieutenant Wilson here refused your surrender. You praised him for his thinking then. Consider his thinking now."

"Consider his thinking?" Sorvalh said, to Abumwe. "Or give him a decision on credit, because of a presumed debt to him?"

"I would prefer the first," Abumwe said. "I would take the second, however."

Sorvalh smiled at this, looked over to Wilson and then to Fotew. "Captain?"

"I think it's a waste," Fotew said. "But it's your call to make, Councillor."

"Prepare a missile," Sorvalh said. Captain Fotew turned to do her bidding; Sorvalh turned her attention back to Wilson. "You used your

credit with me, Lieutenant," she said. "Let's hope that in the future you don't have cause to wish you had spent it on something else."

Wilson nodded and opened up a channel to the *Urse Damay*. "Rayth Ablant," he said.

I am here, came back the text.

"I've gotten you what you wanted," Wilson said.

Just in time. I am down to the last 2 percent of my power.

"Missile prepped and ready for launch," Captain Fotew said, to Sorvalh. Sorvalh nodded to Wilson.

"Just tell me when you want it," Wilson said.

Now is good.

Wilson nodded to Fotew. "Fire," she said, to her weapons station.

"On its way," Wilson said.

Thank you for everything, Lieutenant Wilson.

"Glad to," Wilson said.

I'll miss you.

"Likewise," Wilson said.

There was no response.

"We've cracked the order," the science officer said.

"Tell us," Sorvalh said.

The science officer looked at the humans on the bridge and then Captain Fortew. "Ma'am?" she said.

"You have your orders," Fotew said.

"The coordinates for the return flight of the *Urse Damay* are in this system," the science officer said. "They resolve under the surface of the local star. If it came out of skip there, it would have been destroyed instantly."

"Your friend was never going home, Lieutenant Wilson," Sorvalh said.

"Missile has reached the *Urse Damay,*" Fotew said, looking at her bridge display. "Direct hit."

"I'd like to think he just got there on his own, Councillor," Wilson said.

He walked off the bridge of the *Nurimal* and headed toward the shuttle bay, alone.

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EPISODE TWELVE

The Gentle Art of Cracking Heads

"This is a very interesting theory you have, about conspiracy," said Gustavo Vinicius, the undersecretary for administration for the Brazilian consulate in New York City.

Danielle Lowen frowned. She was supposed to be having this meeting with the consul general, but when she arrived at the consulate she was shunted to Vinicius instead. The undersecretary was very handsome, very cocksure and, Lowen suspected, not in the least bright. He was very much the sort of person who exuded the entitled air of nepotism, probably the less-than-useful nephew of a Brazilian senator or ambassador, assigned someplace where his personal flaws would be covered by diplomatic immunity.

There was only so much Lowen could stew about the nepotism. Her father, after all, was the United States secretary of state. But the genial, handsome stupidity of this Vinicius fellow was getting on her nerves.

"Are you suggesting that Luiza Carvalho acted alone?" she asked. "That a career politician, with no record whatsoever of criminal or illegal activity, much less any noticeable political affiliations, suddenly took it into her head to murder Liu Cong, another diplomat? In a manner designed to undermine relations between the Earth and the Colonial Union?"

"It is not impossible," Vinicius said. "People see conspiracies because they believe that one person could not do so much damage. Here in the United States, people are still convinced that the men who

shot Presidents Kennedy and Stephenson were part of a conspiracy, when all the evidence pointed to single men, working alone."

"In both cases, however, there was evidence presented," Lowen said. "Which is why I am here now. Your government, Mr. Vinicius, asked the State Department to use this discreet back channel in order to deal with this problem, rather than go through your embassy in Washington. We're happy to do that. But not if you're going to give us the runaround."

"I am not giving you a runaround, I promise," Vinicius said.

"Then why am I meeting with you and not Consul Nascimento?" Lowen asked. "This was supposed to be a high-level, confidential meeting. I flew up from Washington yesterday specifically to take this meeting."

"Consul Nascimento has been at the United Nations all day long," Vinicius said. "There were emergency meetings there. She sends her regrets."

"I was at the United Nations before I came here," Lowen said.

"It is a large institution," Vinicius said. "It's entirely possible that you would not have crossed paths."

"I was assured that I would be given information pertaining to Ms. Carvalho's actions," Lowen said.

"I regret I have nothing to give you at this time," Vinicius said. "It's possible that we may have misunderstood each other in our previous communications."

"Really, Mr. Vinicius?" Lowen said. "Our mutual State Departments, who have been in constant contact since your nation brought its first legation to Washington in 1824, are suddenly having communication difficulties?"

"It is not impossible," Vinicius said, for the second time in their conversation. "There are always subtleties which might go misread."

"I am certain things are going misread at the moment, Mr. Vinicius," Lowen said. "I don't know how subtle they are."

"And if I may say so, Ms. Lowen, in the case of this particular issue, there is so much disinformation going on about the event," Vinicius said. "All sorts of different stories about what happened on this ship where the events took place."

"Is that so," Lowen said.

"Yes," Vinicius. "The eyewitness reports aren't especially credible."

Lowen smiled at Vinicius. "Is this your personal opinion, Mr. Vinicius, or the opinion of the Brazilian Ministry of External Relations?"

Vinicius smiled back and supplied a little hand movement, as if to suggest the answer was, *A little of both*.

"So you're saying that I am not a credible eyewitness," Lowen said.

Vinicius's smile vanished. "Excuse me?" he said.

"You're saying I am not a credible eyewitness," Lowen repeated. "Because I was part of that diplomatic mission, Mr. Vinicius. In fact, not only was I there, I also conducted the autopsy that established that Liu Cong's death was murder, and also helped identify how it was the murder was accomplished. When you say that the eyewitness reports are not credible, you're talking about me, specifically and directly. If what you're saying actually reflects the opinion of the Ministry of External Relations, then we have a problem. A very large problem."

"Ms. Lowen, I—," Vinicius began.

"Mr. Vinicius, it's clear we got off on the wrong foot here, because I was assured there would be actual information for me, and because you are clearly an unprepared idiot," Lowen said, standing. Vinicius rushed to stand as well. "So I suggest we start again. Here's how we're going to do that. I am going to go downstairs and across the street to get a cup of coffee and perhaps a bagel. I will take my time enjoying them. Let's say a half hour. When I return, in half an hour, Consul General Nascimento will be here to give me a full and confidential briefing on everything the Brazilian government knows about Luiza Carvalho, which I will then report back to the secretary of state, who, just in case you didn't know, as it's clear you don't know much of anything, is also

my father, which if nothing else assures that he will take my call. If, when I return, Consul Nascimento is here and you are nowhere nearby, I might not suggest that you be fired by the end of the day. If, when I return, she is *not* here, and I have to see your smug face again, then I would suggest you take a long lunch break to book your trip back to Brasília, because you're going to be there by this time tomorrow. Are we clear on these details?"

"Uh," Vinicius said.

"Good," Lowen said. "Then I expect to see Consul Nascimento in half an hour." She walked out of Vinicius's office and was at the consulate's elevator before Vinicius could blink.

Across the street at the doughnut shop, Lowen pulled out her PDA and called her father's office, getting James Prescott, his chief of staff. "How did it go?" Prescott asked, without preamble, as he opened up the connection.

"Pretty much exactly as we anticipated," Lowen said. "Nascimento wasn't there and pawned me off on an egregiously stupid underling."

"Let me guess," Prescott said. "A guy named Vinicius."

"Bing," Lowen said.

"He's got a reputation for stupidity," Prescott said. "His mother is the minister of education."

"I *knew* it," Lowen said. "Mommy's boy made a particularly dumb remark, and that allowed me to tell him to produce Nascimento or I would start a major diplomatic incident."

"Ah, the gentle art of cracking heads," Prescott said.

"Subtle wasn't going to work on this guy," Lowen said, and then the windows of the doughnut shop shattered from the pressure wave created by the exploding building across the street.

Lowen and everyone else in the shop ducked and yelled, and then there was the sound of glass and falling debris outside, all over Sixth Avenue. She opened her eyes cautiously and saw that the glass of the doughnut shop windows, while shattered, had stayed in their frames,

and that everyone in the doughnut shop, at least, was alive and unharmed.

Prescott was yelling out of the speaker of her PDA; she put the thing back to her ear. "I'm fine, I'm fine," she said. "Everything's fine."

"What just happened?" Prescott asked.

"Something just happened to the building across the street," Lowen said. She weaved her way through the still-crouching patrons of the doughnut shop and went to the door, opening it gently to avoid dislodging the shattered glass. She looked up.

"I think I'm not going to get that meeting with Nascimento," she said, to Prescott.

"Why not?" Prescott said.

"The Brazilian consulate isn't there anymore," Lowen said. She disconnected the PDA, used it to take pictures of the wreckage on and above Sixth Avenue and then, as a doctor, started to tend to the injured on the street.

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"Amazonian separatists," Prescott said. He'd caught the shuttle up from Washington an hour after the bombing. "That's who they're blaming it on."

"You have *got* to be kidding me," Lowen said. She and Prescott were in a staff lounge of the State Department's Office of Foreign Missions. She'd already given her statement to the New York Police Department and the FBI and given copies of her pictures to each. Now she was taking a break before she did the whole thing over again with State.

"I didn't expect you to believe it," Prescott said. "I'm just telling you what the Brazilians are saying. They maintain someone from the group called in and took responsibility. I think we're supposed to overlook that the specific group they're pinning it on has never once perpetrated a violent act, much less traveled to another country and planted a bomb in a secure location."

"They're crafty, those Amazonian separatists," Lowen said.

"You have to admit it's overkill, though," Prescott said. "Blowing up their consulate to avoid talking to you."

"I know you're joking, but I'm going to say it anyway, just to hear myself say it: The Brazilians didn't blow up their own consulate," Lowen said. "Whoever our friend Luiza Carvalho was in bed with did it."

"Yes," Prescott said. "It's still overkill. Especially since the Brazilian ambassador is now down at Foggy Bottom giving your father everything they know about Carvalho's life and associations. If their plan was to intimidate the Brazilian government into silence, it's gone spectacularly wrong."

"I'm guessing it wasn't their plan," Lowen said.

"If you have any idea what the plan is, I'll be happy to hear it," Prescott said. "I have to go back down tonight to meet with Lowen senior."

"I have no idea, Jim," Lowen said. "I'm a doctor, not a private investigator."

"Rampant speculation would be fine," Prescott said.

"Maybe distraction?" Lowen said. "If you blow up a Brazilian consulate on American soil, you focus two governments' attention on one thing: the consulate exploding. We're going to be dealing with that for a few months. Meanwhile, whatever else these people are doing—like what the plan was behind Carvalho's killing Liu Cong—gets put on the back burner."

"We're still getting the information about Carvalho," Prescott said.

"Yes, but what are we going to do about it?" Lowen said. "You're the U.S. government. You have the choice between focusing on a case of a foreign national killing another foreign national on a Colonial Union ship, on which you have no jurisdiction whatsoever and only a tangential concern with, or you can focus your time and energy on whoever just killed thirty-two people on Sixth Avenue in New York City. Which do you choose?"

"They might be the same people," Prescott said.

"They might be," Lowen said. "But my guess is that if they are, they've kept themselves far enough away from events that there's someone else the direct line points to. And you know how that is. If we have an obvious suspect with an obvious motive, that's where we go."

"Like Amazonian separatists," Prescott said, archly.

"Exactly," Lowen said.

"The timing is still a little bit too perfect," Prescott said. "You stepping out and the consulate going up."

"I think *that* was coincidence," Lowen said. "If they were timing it, they would have waited until Nascimento was back in the office."

"Which would have meant you would have died, too," Prescott said.

"Which would have suited their purposes of distraction even more," Lowen said. "Blowing up the daughter of the secretary of state would definitely have drawn the focus of the United States. Another reason to assume the bomb was set in motion a long time ago."

"When I present your theory to the secretary, I'm going to leave that last part out," Prescott said. He pulled out his PDA to take notes. "I'm sure you'll understand why."

"That's perfectly fine," Lowen said.

"Huh," Prescott said, looking at his PDA.

"What?" Lowen asked.

"I'm sending you a news link that was just forwarded to me," Prescott said.

Lowen pulled out her PDA and opened the link; it was a news story on her tending to the injured on Sixth Avenue after the explosion. There was video of her kneeling over a prone woman.

"Oh, come *on,*" Lowen said. "She wasn't even hurt. She just freaked out and collapsed when the bomb went off."

"Check your message queue," Prescott said.

Lowen did. There were several dozen media requests for interviews. "Gaaah," she said, throwing her PDA onto the table, away from her.

"I've become part of the distraction."

"I take it this means the State Department should say you're unavailable for interviews at this time," Prescott said.

"Or ever," Lowen said. She went to get some coffee to self-medicate for her quickly approaching headache.

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Lowen ended up doing six interviews: one for *The New York Times,* one for *The Washington Post,* two morning news shows and two audio programs. In each she smiled and explained that she was just doing her job, which was not strictly true, as she had given up the daily practice of medicine to work for the U.S. State Department, and anyway her specialty had been hematology. But no one called her on it, because the story of the daughter of the secretary of state arriving like a healing angel at the scene of a terrorist act was too feel-good to mess with.

Lowen cringed as her picture was splashed across screens all over the planet for two whole news cycles, the second news cycle prompted when she received a call from the president, who thanked her for her service to the nation. Lowen thanked the president for the call and made a note to yell at her father, who had undoubtedly set up the media op for his boss, who had to contend with midterm elections and could use a spot of positive public relations.

Lowen didn't want to deal with any more interviews or congratulatory calls or messages or even the offer by the Brazilian Ministry of Tourism to come for a visit. What she really wanted was to get her hands on the file concerning Luiza Carvalho. She pestered both Prescott and her father until it showed up, along with a State Department functionary whose job it was to not let the file out of her sight. Lowen gave her a soda and let her sit down with her at the kitchen table while she read.

After a few minutes, she looked over to the State Department courier. "Seriously, this is it?" she said.

"I didn't read the file, ma'am," the courier said.

The file had nothing of note about Luiza Carvalho. She was born in Belo Horizonte; her parents were both physicians; no brothers or sisters. She attended Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, earning degrees in economics and law before joining the Brazilian diplomatic corps. Postings in Vietnam, the Siberian States, Ecuador and Mexico before being called up to be part of Brazil's United Nations mission, which was where she had been serving for six years before she took on the *Clarke* mission, where she murdered Liu Cong.

Like all Brazilian foreign service workers, Carvalho was questioned annually by her superiors about her associations and activities and also consented to be randomly "examined" (that is, followed and bugged) by the Brazilian intelligence services to make sure she wasn't doing anything untoward. Aside from some questionable sexual liaisons —"questionable" in terms of taste in partners, not in terms of national security—there was nothing out of the usual.

Carvalho had no associations or friends outside of the foreign service community. The only trips she took were Christmastime visits to Belo Horizonte to spend the holidays with her parents. She took almost no time off except for two years prior to her death, when she was hospitalized for a case of viral meningitis; she spent four days in the hospital and then another two weeks at home recovering. And then it was back to work for her.

No pets.

"This woman is *boring,*" Lowen said, out loud but to herself. The courier coughed noncommittally.

An hour later the courier had left, file in hand, and Lowen was left with nothing but a feeling of unsatisfied irritation. She thought perhaps a drink might fix that, but a check of her fridge informed her that the only thing in that appliance was the dregs of some iced tea that she couldn't recall making. Lowen grimaced at the fact that she was coming up with a blank concerning when she had made the tea, then grabbed the pitcher and poured it out into the sink. Then she left her Alexandria condo and walked the two blocks to the nearest well-lit suburban chain

theme restaurant, sat at its central bar and ordered something large and fruity for no other reason than to counteract the taste of boring that Luiza Carvalho had left in her mouth.

"That's a big drink," someone said to her a few minutes later. She looked up from her drink to see a generically handsome-looking man standing a few feet from her at the bar.

"The irony is that this is the small size," Lowen said. "The large margarita here comes in a glass the size of a hot tub. It's for when you've decided that alcohol poisoning is a way of life."

The blandly handsome man smiled at this and then cocked his head. "You look familiar," he said.

"Tell me you have better pickup lines than that," Lowen said.

"I do," the man said, "but I wasn't trying to pick you up. You just look familiar." He looked at her more closely and then snapped his fingers. "That's it," he said. "You look like that doctor at the Brazilian consulate bombing."

"I get that a lot," Lowen said.

"I'm sure you do," the man said. "But it couldn't be you, could it. You're here in D.C. and the consulate was in New York."

"Sound logic," Lowen said.

"Do you have an identical twin?" the man asked, and then gestured at the bar stool next to Lowen. "Do you mind?"

Lowen shrugged and made a *whatever* hand movement. The man sat. "I don't have an identical twin, no," she said. "No fraternal twin, either. I have one brother. I pray to God we don't look the same."

"Then you could be that woman's professional double," the man said. "You could hire out for parties."

"I don't think she's that famous," Lowen said.

"Hey, she got a call from the president," the man said. "When was the last time that happened to you?"

"You'd be surprised," Lowen said.

"Cuba libre," the man said to the bartender as she came up. He looked over to Lowen. "I'd offer to buy you a drink, but…"

"Oh, Lord, no," Lowen said. "I'll have to hire a taxi to get home after this thing, and I only live a couple of blocks away."

"Cuba libre," the man repeated, and then turned his attention to Lowen again. He extended his hand. "John Berger," he said.

Lowen took it. "Danielle Lowen," she said.

Berger looked momentarily confused and then smiled. "You *are* that doctor from the Brazilian consulate," he said. "And you work for the State Department. Which is how you could be here and have been in New York yesterday. I'm sorry, let me introduce myself again." Berger held out his hand once more. "Hello, I'm a moron."

Lowen laughed and took his hand a second time. "Hello," she said. "Don't feel bad. I wasn't exactly being forthcoming."

"Well, after all the attention you got the last couple of days, I can see why you might want to lay low," Berger said. He motioned to Lowen's drink. "Is that what the tub of margarita is about?"

"What? No," Lowen said, and made a grimace. "Well, maybe. Not exactly."

"The drink is working," Berger said.

"It's not about the attention, although that certainly could have driven me to drink," Lowen said. "It's about something else, related to my job."

"And what is that, if you don't mind me asking?" Berger said.

"What do you do, Mr. Berger?" Lowen asked.

"John," Berger said. His Cuba libre arrived. He smiled his thanks to the bartender and took a drink. Then it was his turn to grimace. "This is not the best Cuba libre I've had," he said.

Lowen flicked the edge of her margarita glass with her finger. "Next time, go with one of these tubs," she said.

"Maybe I will," Berger said, took another drink of his Cuba libre and then set it down. "I'm a salesman," he said. "Pharmaceuticals."

"I remember *you* guys," Lowen said.

"I bet you do," Berger said.

"Now it makes sense," Lowen said. "Easy conversationalist, blandly attractive, not too quirky, looking for the sale."

"You have me pegged," Berger said.

"You're not going to make the sale," Lowen said. "I mean, no offense. But I plan on walking out of here alone tonight."

"Fair enough," Berger said. "Good conversation was my only goal, anyway."

"Was it," Lowen said, and drank some more of her margarita. "All right, John, a question for you. How do you make a boring person a killer?"

Berger was quiet for a moment. "Now I'm suddenly very glad I won't be making that sale," he said.

"I'm serious," Lowen said. "Hypothetically, you have this person. She's a normal person, right? She has normal parents, has a normal childhood, goes to a normal school, gets normal degrees and then goes and has a normal job. And then one day, for no particularly good reason that anyone could see, she goes and murders some guy. And not in a normal way—I mean, not with a gun or a knife or a bat. No, she does it in a complicated way. How does that happen?"

"Is the guy an ex-lover?" Berger asked. "Hypothetically, I mean."

"Hypothetically, no," Lowen said. "Hypothetically, the best way to describe their relationship would be work colleagues, and not particularly close ones at that."

"And she's not a spy, or a secret agent, or leading a double life as a crafty assassin," Berger said.

"She's completely normal, and completely boring," Lowen said. "Doesn't even have pets. Hypothetically."

Berger took a sip from his Cuba libre. "Then I'm going to go with what I know," he said. "Mental derangement caused by addiction to pharmaceuticals."

"There are drugs that can turn you from a boring person into a methodical murderer, as opposed to turning them into someone who kills everything in the house in a rage, including the fish?" Lowen

asked. “I don’t remember those being touted to me when I was working as a doctor.”

“Well, no, there’s nothing that will do something that specific,” Berger said. “But you know as well as I do that, one, sometimes drug interactions will do funny things—”

“Turn someone into a methodical murderer?” Lowen asked again, incredulously.

“—and two, there are lots of our products out there that will eat your brain if you overuse them, and if they eat your brain, then you’ll start doing uncharacteristic things. Like becoming a methodical murderer, maybe.”

“A reasonable hypothesis,” Lowen said. “But hypothetically this person was not regularly taking either legal or illegal pharmaceuticals. Next.”

“All right,” Berger said, and gave the appearance of thinking quickly. “A tumor.”

“A tumor,” Lowen said.

“Sure, a tumor,” Berger said. “A brain tumor starts growing, hypothetically, and starts pressing on a part of the brain that processes things like knowing what is socially appropriate behavior. As the thing grows, our boring person starts putting her mind to murder.”

“Interesting,” Lowen said. She sipped her drink again.

“I’ve read stories about such things, and not only because my company sells a pharmaceutical treatment for cutting off the blood supply to tumorous masses in the body,” Berger said.

“It’s good to read for recreation,” Lowen said.

“I think so, too,” Berger said.

“And as superficially appealing as that suggestion is, this hypothetical person received a clean bill of health before her last assignment,” Lowen said. “It was hypothetically a job that required extensive amounts of travel, so a thorough physical examination was part of the job protocol.”

“This hypothetical person is getting very specific,” Berger said.

"I don't make up the rules," Lowen said.

"Yes, you do," Berger said. "That's why it's a hypothetical."

"One more chance, Mr. Berger, comma, John," Lowen said. "So make it good."

"Wow, on the spot," Berger said. "Okay. Remote control."

"What?" Lowen said. "Seriously, now."

"Hear me out," Berger said. "If you wanted to do someone in, and have no one know, and completely cover your tracks, how would you do it? You would have someone that no one would ever expect do it. But how do you get them to do it? Skilled assassins may be good at looking like normal people, but the best assassins would be people who are normal people. So you find a normal person. And you put a remote control in their brain."

"You've been reading a few too many science fiction thrillers," Lowen said.

"Not a remote control that gives you gross control over a body, with everything herky jerky," Berger said. "No, what you want is something that will lay across the frontal lobes and then subtly and slowly, over the course of time, bend someone towards doing the unspeakable. Do it so the person doesn't even notice their own personality changing, or questions the necessity to kill someone. They just go ahead and plan it and do it, like they're filing taxes or making a report."

"I think people would notice a remote control in someone's head, though," Lowen said. "Not to mention the hypothetical person would remember someone opening up their skull to get inside of it."

"Well, if you were the sort of people who would make this sort of remote control, you wouldn't make it easy to find," Berger said. "And you wouldn't make it obvious when it was inserted. You'd find some way to slip it into their body when they weren't expecting it." He pointed at Lowen's drink. "Nanobots in your drink, maybe. You'd only need a few and then you could program those few to replicate inside the body until you had enough. The only problem you might

have is if the body starts trying to fight off the 'bots and then the person gets sick. That would present as, say, a meningitis of some sort."

Lowen stopped sipping her drink and looked at Berger. "What did you just say?" she said.

"Meningitis," Berger said. "It's when there's a swelling of the brain —"

"I know what meningitis is," Lowen said.

"So it looks like meningitis," Berger said. "At least until the people who have inserted the 'bots tweak the 'bots so that they don't cause an immune response. And then after that, they stay in the brain, mostly passive and mostly undetectable, until they're turned on and they perform their slow counterprogramming."

Berger took another sip from his drink. "After that, it's just a matter of timing," he said. "You get the person with the remote control in the right places, let them use their own brains to take advantage of situations, and slip them just enough instruction and motivation that they do what you want them to, more or less when you want them to do it, and they think it's their own idea. Their own quiet, secret idea that they feel no need to tell anyone else about. If they succeed, then the remote control shuts down and gets excreted out of the body over a few days and no one is the wiser, least of all the person who's been remote controlled."

"And if they fail?" Lowen asked, almost whispering.

"Then the person who's being remote controlled finds a way to get rid of themself, so no one can find out about the remote control in their brain. Not that they know that's why they're doing it, of course. That's the point of the remote control. Either way, you'll never know that the remote control existed. You have no way of knowing. In fact, the only way you would ever know is if, say, someone who knows about these things tells you about them, perhaps because he's sick of this sort of shit and doesn't care about the consequences anymore."

Berger slugged back the remainder of his Cuba libre and set it down on the bar.

"Hypothetically," he said.

"Who are you?" Lowen said again.

"I told you, I'm a pharmaceutical salesman," Berger said. He reached into his back pocket and took out his wallet and grabbed a couple of bills. "I'm a pharmaceutical salesman who was looking for some interesting conversation. I've had that, and I've had my drink, and now, I'm going to go home. That's not what I suggest *you* do, however, Dr. Lowen. At least not tonight." He dropped the bills onto the bar. "There, that should cover us both." He held out his hand again. "Good night, Danielle," he said.

Lowen shook his hand, dumbly, and then watched him walk out of the restaurant.

The bartender came over, took the bills and reached for Berger's glass. "*No,*" Lowen said, forcefully. The bartender looked at her strangely. "Sorry," Lowen said. "Just … don't touch that glass, okay? In fact, I want to buy the glass from you. Ring it up for me. And bring me some coffee, please. Black."

The bartender rolled her eyes at Lowen but went away to ring up the glass. Lowen pulled it closer to her by dragging it by the cocktail napkin underneath and then pulled out her PDA. She called James Prescott.

"Hi, Jim," she said. "Don't tell Dad, but I think I just got put in a hell of a lot of trouble. I need you to come get me. You might bring the FBI with you. Tell them to bring an evidence kit. Hurry, please. I don't want to be out in the open any longer than I have to be."

• • •

"You have an interesting relationship with trouble recently," Prescott told her some time later, when they were both safely ensconced at Foggy Bottom, in Prescott's office.

"You don't think I *like* this, do you?" Lowen said. She sank lower into Prescott's couch.

"I don't think 'like' has anything to do with it," Prescott said. "It doesn't change the relevance of my statement, though."

"You understand why I got paranoid, right?" Lowen said to Prescott.

"You mean, random man comes in, tells you a story that, as ridiculous as it is, perfectly explains the problem of Luiza Carvalho murdering Liu Cong, pays for your drink and then tells you not to go home?" Prescott said. "No, I have no idea why you feel paranoid in the slightest."

"You have a bunker underneath this building, right?" Lowen said. "I think I want to go there."

"That's the White House," Prescott said. "And relax. You're safe here."

"Right, because I haven't had any buildings filled with diplomats blow up near me anytime recently," Lowen said.

"Don't make *me* paranoid, Danielle," Prescott said.

The door to Prescott's office opened and Prescott's aide poked his head through. "The FBI just sent you a very preliminary report," he said.

"Thank you, Tony," Prescott said, and reached for his PDA. "Bring me some coffee, please."

"Yes, sir," he said. He turned to Lowen. "And for you, Dr. Lowen?"

"I don't need to be any more jittery, thanks," Lowen said. Tony closed the door.

"First things first," Prescott said, reading the preliminary report. "'John Berger,' or at least the one you met, doesn't exist. They cross-referenced the name with the tax database. There are ten John Bergers in the D.C. metropolitan area, but none of them live in Alexandria and none of them have as their occupation pharmaceutical salesman. This fact, I imagine, does not surprise you."

"Not really," Lowen said.

"The DNA we got off the glass is being processed and maybe they'll have something for us later," Prescott said. "They've run the fingerprints through federal and local and have come up with nothing. They're checking the international databases now. They've also taken the bar security tape and used it to do facial recognition scanning. No results there so far, either."

"So I'm not actually paranoid in this case," Lowen said.

"No, you *are* actually paranoid," Prescott said, setting down his PDA. "You're just paranoid with good reason."

"The story he told me is still nuts," Lowen said.

"That it definitely is," Prescott said. "The only real problem with it is that it's not *completely* impossible. Carvalho killed Liu with blood-borne nanobots specifically designed to asphyxiate him. It's not entirely crazy to believe that someone could design 'bots to work on the brain in the way your friend suggested. The Colonial Union's BrainPals trigger parts of their owners' brains. None of this is particularly new in its details. It's how it's being used that's new. Hypothetically."

Lowen shivered. "You know what, don't use that word with me at the moment, please."

"Okay," Prescott said, a little warily. "The real problem we have with all of this is that we don't have any way to verify it. The Colonial Union let Carvalho float out into space. We have a good story, but good stories aren't enough."

"You believe it," Lowen said.

"I believe it's possible," Prescott said. "I believe it's possible enough that I'm going to recommend to your father that we design a protocol for nanobiotic infestations and their eradication if and when we find them. The nice thing about this story is that even if it's completely crazy, if we get a process out of it, then this particular avenue of sabotage gets closed. If it doesn't exist, then it gets closed before it can become a problem."

"Three cheers for paranoia," Lowen said.

"What would really help, of course, is if we could find this friend of yours," Prescott said. "Conspiracy theories involving remote controls in the brain are more believable when you have people who can accurately describe them."

"I don't think you're going to manage that one," Lowen said.

"Never say never," Prescott said. The door opened and Tony came through, bearing coffee. "Your coffee," he said. "Also, the FBI is requesting visual."

"Right," Prescott said, set his coffee down and picked up the PDA again, pausing briefly to also loop on an earpiece. "This is Prescott," he said, looking into the PDA.

Lowen watched him listen to the PDA, glance over to her and then glance back at the PDA. "Got it," he said, after a minute. "I'm going to mute you for a second." He pressed the screen and looked over at Lowen. "They think they found your friend," he said. "At least, based on the screen shot they got from the security camera. They want you to take a look and confirm."

"All right," Lowen said, and reached for the PDA.

"Uh," Prescott said. "He's kind of a mess."

"You mean he's dead," Lowen said.

"Yes," Prescott said. "You don't sound surprised."

"Give it to me," Lowen said.

Prescott handed it over, along with the earpiece. "This is Danielle Lowen," she said, after she slipped on the earpiece and unmuted the PDA. "Show me."

The image on the screen wheeled for a minute and then resolved to a body lying in an otherwise nondescript alley. The head of the body was covered in blood; as the PDA got closer, Lowen could see the deep crease above the right temple. Someone had cracked the head wide open.

For all that, the face was still blandly handsome, with the residue of a small, tight smile.

"That's him," Lowen said. "Of course it's him."

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EPISODE THIRTEEN

Earth Below, Sky Above, Parts One and Two

PART ONE

I.

"I'm not going to lie to you, Harry," Hart Schmidt said. "I'm a little concerned that you've taken me to a maintenance airlock."

"I'm not going to toss you into space, Hart," Wilson said. He tapped the outer portal of the airlock, which had among its features a small porthole made of a thick, transparent alloy. "It's just that the airlocks are one of the only places on this whole godforsaken tub where you can find an actual one of *these*."

"Don't let Captain Coloma catch you calling the *Clarke* a tub," Schmidt said.

"She knows it's a tub," Wilson said.

"Yes, but she wouldn't like you to *say* it," Schmidt said. "She'd start the purge cycle on this airlock."

"The captain's on the bridge," Wilson said. "And anyway, she's got a lot of better reasons to space me than me making a crack about her ship."

Schmidt peered at the porthole. "This isn't going to be a very good view," he said.

"It'll do well enough," Wilson said.

"There are lots of monitors on the ship that will give you a better look," Schmidt said.

"It's not the same," Wilson said.

"The resolution on the displays is better than your eyes can resolve," Schmidt said. "As far as your eyes are concerned, it will be exactly the same. Even better, since you'll be able to see more."

"It's not the eyes that matter," Wilson said. "It's the brain. And my brain would know."

Schmidt said nothing to this.

"You have to understand, Hart," Wilson said. "When you leave, they tell you that you can never come back. It's not an idle threat. They take everything from you before you go. You're declared legally dead. Everything you own is parceled out according to your will, if you have one. When you say 'good-bye' to people, it really is for the last time. You don't see them again. You never see them again. You won't know anything that ever happens to them again. It really is like you've died. Then you get on a delta, ride up the beanstalk and get on a ship. The ship takes you away. They never let you come back again."

"You never considered the idea you might come back one day?" Schmidt said.

Wilson shook his head. "No one ever did. No one. The closest anyone ever comes to it are the guys on the transport ships who stand in front of the room full of new recruits and tell them that in ten years, most of them will be stone dead," he said. "But even they don't ever come back, really. They don't leave the ships, at least not until they get back to Phoenix Station. When you're gone, you're gone. You're gone forever."

Wilson looked out the porthole. "It's a hell of a thing, Hart," he said. "At the time, it might not seem like a bad deal. When the Colonial Union takes you, you're seventy-five years old, you've probably had some major health scare and a few minor ones, you might have bad knees and bad eyes and maybe you haven't been able to get it up for a while. If you don't go, then you're going to be dead. Which means you'll be gone anyway. Better to be gone and live."

"It seems reasonable," Schmidt said.

"Yes," Wilson agreed. "But then you *do* go. And you do live. And the longer you live—the longer you live in *this* universe—the more you miss it. The more you miss the places you lived, and the people you know. The more you realize that you made a hard bargain. The more you realize you might have made a mistake in leaving."

"You've never said anything about this before," Schmidt said.

"What is there to say?" Wilson said, looking back at his friend. "My grandfather used to tell me that his grandfather told him a story about his grandfather, who immigrated to the United States from some other country. What other country, he wouldn't say; he never talked about the old country to anyone, Grandpa said, not even his wife. When they asked him why, he said he left it behind for a reason, and whether that reason was good or bad, it was enough."

"It didn't bother his wife not knowing where he came from?" Schmidt asked.

"It's just a story," Wilson said. "I'm pretty sure Grandpa embroidered that part. But the point is that the past is the past and you let things go because you can't change them anyway. My grandfather many times over didn't talk about where he came from because he was never going back. For better or worse, that part of his life was done. For me, it was the same thing. That part of my life was done. What else was there to say?"

"Until now," Schmidt said.

"Until now," Wilson agreed, and checked his BrainPal. "Quite literally now. We skip in ten seconds." He turned his attention back to the porthole, silently counting off the seconds.

The skip was like all skips: quiet, unimpressive, anticlimactic. The glare of the lights in the airlock were enough to wash out the sky on the other side of the porthole, but Wilson's genetically-engineered eyes were good enough that he could make out a few of the stars.

"I think I see Orion," he said.

"What's Orion?" Schmidt asked. Wilson ignored him.

The *Clarke* turned, and a planet rolled into view.

The Earth.

"Hello, gorgeous," Wilson said, through the porthole. "I missed you."

"How does it feel to be home?" Schmidt asked.

"Like I never left," Wilson said, and then lapsed into silence.

Schmidt gave him a few moments and then tapped him on the shoulder. "Okay, my turn," he said.

"Go look at a display," Wilson said.

Schmidt smiled. "Come on, Harry," he said. "You know it's not the same."

II.

"This is a bad idea," Colonel Abel Rigney said to Colonel Liz Egan over pasta.

"I agree," Egan said. "I wanted Thai."

"One, you know that it was my turn to pick," Rigney said. "Two, you know that's not what I'm talking about."

"We're talking yet again about the summit between us and the Earthlings at Earth Station," Egan said.

"Yes," Rigney said.

"Is this an official thing?" Egan asked. "Are you, Colonel Rigney, communicating to me, the Colonial Defense Forces liaison to the Department of State, a statement from your superiors that I will be obliged to deliver to the secretary?"

"Don't be like that, Liz," Rigney said.

"So, no," Egan said. "It's not an official communication and you're just taking advantage of our lunchtime to kvetch again in my general direction."

"I'm not comfortable with that assessment of the situation," Rigney said. "But yes, that's basically correct."

"Are you opposed to the summit?" Egan said, twirling her pasta on a fork. "Have you joined the ranks of those in the CDF who think we

need to go to Earth with guns blazing and try to take over the place? Because *that* will be an adventure, I have to tell you."

"I think the summit is likely to be a waste of time," Rigney admitted. "There are still too many people pissed at the CDF down there on Earth. Then there are the people who are pissed at the Earth governments for not letting them emigrate or enlist before they die. Then there's the fact there are still a couple hundred sovereign states on that planet, none of which wants to agree with anyone else, except on the subject of being unhappy with us. It will all end up with yelling and screaming and time being wasted, time that neither we nor the Earth really have. So, yes, waste of time."

"If the summit were to go off as originally planned, I would agree," Egan said. "Although the alternative—no summit, the Earth turning away from the Colonial Union, the Conclave waiting in the wings to sweep it up as a member—is considerably worse. Engagement is key, even if nothing gets done, which it won't."

"That's not my actual concern," Rigney said. "If our diplomats and theirs want to talk until they are blue in the face, then I wish them joy. I have problems with the setup."

"You mean having it on Earth Station," Egan said.

"Right," Rigney said. "It'd be better to have it here at Phoenix Station."

"Because there's no environment the Earthlings will find *less* intimidating than the single largest object humanity's ever built," Egan said. "Which incidentally will also serve to remind them just how bottled up we've kept them for the last two hundred years or so." She stuffed pasta into her mouth.

"You may have a point," Rigney said, after a second of consideration.

"I *may,*" Egan said, around her pasta, and then swallowed. "We can't have the summit here, for the reasons I just enumerated. We can't have the summit on Earth because there's nowhere on the planet short of the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station where there wouldn't be

riots, either by the people who hate the Colonial Union or by the people who want us to get them off that rock. The *Conclave,* of all people, offered to host the summit as a quote unquote neutral third party at their own administrative rock, which I will remind you is an order of magnitude or two larger than Phoenix Station. We definitely don't want the Earthlings to make any inferences off of *that*. So what are we left with?"

"Earth Station," Rigney said.

"Earth Station indeed," Egan said. "Which we own, even though it's above Earth. And that is in fact going to be a negotiating point."

Rigney furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?" he said.

"We're offering to lease it," Egan said. "The lease strategy was approved this morning, in fact."

"No one told *me* about it," Rigney said.

"No offense, Abel, but why would anyone tell you?" Egan said. "You're a colonel, not a general."

Rigney pulled at the collar of his uniform. "Stab me again, why don't you, Liz," he said.

"That's not what I meant," Egan said. "I wouldn't know about it, either, except that I'm the liaison, and State needed the CDF to sign off on this. This is an agreement far above both of our pay grades. But it really is a masterstroke, if you think about it."

"Us losing our sole outpost above Earth is a masterstroke?" Rigney said.

"We're not going to lose it," Egan said. "We'll still own it, and mooring rights will be part of any deal. It's a masterstroke because it changes the nature of the game. Right now Earth has no egress into space. We locked up the planet for so long that there's no infrastructure for space travel. They have no stations. They have no spaceports. They hardly have *spaceships,* for God's sake. It will take them years and a few multiples of their yearly global output to gear up. Now we're offering up the one way into space that's already there. Whoever controls it will control trade, will control space travel, will control the destiny of

Earth, at least until everyone else on the planet gets their act together. And you know what that means."

"It means we make someone *else* the target and take the heat off of us," Rigney said.

"For starters," Egan said. "And in the immediate time frame also disrupts any united front they may have had going. You said it yourself, Abel. The nations of Earth can't agree about anything except being angry with us. In a single stroke we look apologetic and reasonable, they start fighting among themselves and scrambling to make alliances and deals—"

"And we can pick and choose among the players, play them off against each other and work deals to our advantage," Rigney finished.

"Exactly so," Egan said. "It changes the entire dynamic of the summit."

"Unless they all decide to put aside their petty differences and focus in on us," Rigney said.

"Seems unlikely," Egan said. "I know you and I left Earth fifteen years ago, but I don't think planetary international relations on Earth have reached the 'join hands and sing songs' stage in that time, do you?"

"I guess the right answer here is, 'Let's hope not,'" Rigney said.

Egan nodded. "So now you see why Earth Station is in fact the very best place for the summit to take place," she said. "We're not just discussing Earth and Colonial Union issues, we'll also be walking the showroom with the floor model."

"Do your diplomats know they've been reassigned to be salespeople?" Rigney asked.

"I believe they're finding out right about now," Egan said. She speared some more pasta.

• • •

"They're going to hate this," Rae Sarles said, at the hastily-convened diplomatic staff meeting on the *Clarke*. "We were supposed to be here

to have a frank discussion about other matters entirely, and we're changing the agenda literally hours before we're supposed to be under way. This isn't how it's supposed to be done."

Wilson, standing in the back, glanced over to Abumwe and wondered just how the ambassador would step on this particular recalcitrant underling's head.

"I see," Abumwe said. "And will you be making that observation to the secretary herself? Or the leadership of the Colonial Defense Forces, who signed off on this plan? Or to the heads of every other Colonial Union department involved in this policy change?"

"No, ma'am," Sarles began.

"No," Abumwe said. "Well, then I would suggest that you don't spend any additional time on how things are supposed to be done, and spend a little more time on what we have to do now. The representatives from the various Earth governments may indeed be surprised that we are now open to leasing Earth Station. But our job, Ms. Sarles, is to make them be happy by the change of events. I trust you might be able to manage this."

"Yes, Ambassador," Sarles said.

Wilson smiled. *Head squished,* he thought.

"Beyond this, fundamentally, *our* role has not changed," Abumwe continued. "We have been assigned a series of discussions with smaller and non-aligned countries on Earth. These are third-tier nations in terms of power and influence on Earth, but the Colonial Union is not in a position to ignore or discount any of them, and there is some potential for significant advantages for us…" Abumwe picked up her PDA to send her underlings their updated mission roles. Each of them picked up their own PDAs as if they were in church, following the lead of their pastor.

Half an hour later, the room emptied of underlings, leaving Abumwe and Wilson. "I have a special assignment for you," Abumwe said.

"Will I be meeting with Micronesia?" Wilson said.

"No, I will," Abumwe said. "As it happens, I am supposed to speak with them about the possibility of establishing a base on Kapingamarangi. It's a negotiation of no small importance, or so I have been assured by the secretary herself. So if you're done condescending to me and my team regarding our assignments, let's continue."

"Sorry," Wilson said.

"Since the Perry incident, the Earth has demanded that no Colonial Union military ships or personnel come to or be stationed on Earth Station or on the planet," Abumwe said. "Outside of an occasional high-ranking individual or two, the Colonial Union has honored that request."

"Oh, boy," Wilson said. "This is where you tell me that my assignment is to guard the *Clarke*'s rivets, isn't it."

"Keep interrupting me and it will be," Abumwe said.

"Sorry," Wilson said again.

"And no," Abumwe said. "Leaving aside anything else, it would be cruel to bring you this close to Earth and keep you confined to the ship. And beyond that, you continue to prove yourself useful."

"Thank you, Ambassador." Wilson said.

"You're still a pain in my ass," Abumwe said.

"Understood," Wilson said.

"The CDF continues to have no formal role in these negotiations," Abumwe said. "However, it also sees your presence as an opportunity to reach out to military organizations on Earth. In particular, we know that the United States will have a small military unit present at the summit. We've alerted them to your presence, and they are receptive to meeting with you. So your assignment has two parts. The first part is simply to make yourself available to them."

"Available in what way?" Wilson asked.

"Whatever way they want," Abumwe said. "If they want you to talk to them about life in the CDF, do that. If they want to talk about CDF military strength and tactics, you can do that as well, so long as

you don't reveal any classified information. If they want to drink beer and arm wrestle, do that."

"And while I'm doing that, am I drawing out information from them as well?" Wilson asked.

"If you can," Abumwe said. "You're of low enough rank that the members of that military detail should be comfortable with you as a person. Capitalize on that."

"What's the second part of the assignment?" Wilson asked.

Abumwe smiled. "The CDF wants you to go skydiving."

"Come again?" Wilson said.

"The U.S. military brass heard rumors that the CDF will occasionally drop soldiers onto a planet from a low orbit," Abumwe said. "They want to see it happen."

"Swell," Wilson said.

"You've done it before," Abumwe said. "At least, when I got the assignment for you, it noted that you had done it before."

Wilson nodded. "I did it once," he said. "It doesn't mean I *liked* it. Falling into an atmosphere at supersonic speeds and trusting a thin, fluid layer of nanobots to keep you from turning into a smeary black friction burn across half the sky is not my idea of a fun time."

"I sympathize," Abumwe said. "But inasmuch as it's an actual order, I don't think you have much of a choice."

"There is the minor problem that while I have a standard-issue CDF combat unitard, I don't have the getup for a skyfall," Wilson said.

"The CDF is sending a cargo drone with two," Abumwe said. "One for you and one for whoever jumps with you."

"Someone's jumping with me?" Wilson asked.

"Apparently one of the military detail at the summit has experience with aerial drops and wants to try something more exotic," Abumwe said.

"They understand that the drop suits are controlled by a BrainPal, right?" Wilson said. "Which this other guy won't have. First he'll

asphyxiate, then he'll burn up, and then the tiny parts of him will eventually fall to earth as raindrop nuclei. It's not a good plan."

"You will be controlling the deployment of both suits," Abumwe said.

"So if he dies during the jump, it'll be my fault," Wilson said.

"If he dies during the jump, I would suggest it would be politic for you to follow him," Abumwe said.

"I liked this assignment better when all I had to do was drink beer and arm wrestle," Wilson said.

"There is the fact that when you complete your skydive, you will be on Earth once again," Abumwe pointed out. "Which is something you were told would never happen."

"There is that," Wilson admitted. "I can't say I'm not looking forward to that. On the other hand, Earth Station is connected to the planet by way of a space elevator. I would much rather go that way. Much less dramatic, but also much safer."

Abumwe smiled. "The good news is that you will indeed be taking the beanstalk," she said, referring to the space elevator by its less formal name. "The bad news is that you'll be taking it *up,* back from Earth, almost immediately after you land."

"I'll try to enjoy it until then," Wilson said. "What about you, Ambassador? You're originally from Earth. Any interest in going down to the surface?"

Abumwe shook her head. "I have almost no memory of Earth," she said. "My family left because of civil war in Nigeria. It had lasted the entire span of my parents' lives on Earth. My mother and father's memories of the planet are not pleasant ones. We were lucky to have left, and lucky that there was a place to leave to. We were lucky that the Colonial Union existed."

"These negotiations matter to you," Wilson said.

"Yes," Abumwe said. "They would anyway. This is my job. But I remember my mother's stories and my father's scars. I remember that for all of the sins of the Colonial Union—and it *has* sins, Lieutenant

Wilson—the Earth would always have its wars and its refugees, and the Colonial Union kept its doors open to them. Gave them lives where they didn't have to fear their neighbors, at the very least. I think of the wars and refugees on Earth right now. I think of how many of those refugees who have died might have lived if the Colonial Union was able to take them."

"I'm not sure the Colonial Union has the same priorities that you have, Ambassador," Wilson said.

Abumwe gave Wilson a bitter smile. "I'm aware that the Colonial Union's main purpose in reestablishing relations with Earth is to renew its supply of soldiers," she said. "And I understand we're no longer able to colonize because of the Conclave threatening to wipe out any new settlements we make. But the planets we have still have room, and still need people. So my priorities will still be served. So long as we all do our jobs. Including you."

"I will fall out of the sky as best I can for you," Wilson said.

"See that you do," Abumwe said. She picked up her PDA to turn to other business. "Incidentally, I've assigned you Hart Schmidt, in case you need an assistant for anything. You two seem to work together well. You can tell him I assigned him to you not because he's unimportant, but because your assignment is a priority for the Colonial Union."

"I will," Wilson said. "Is it really?"

"That will depend on you, Lieutenant," Abumwe said. She was fully engrossed in her PDA.

Wilson opened the door to find Hart Schmidt on the other side of it.

"Stalker," Wilson said.

"Cut it out, Harry," Schmidt said. "I'm the only one of the team without an assignment and you just had a ten-minute one-on-one with Abumwe. It doesn't take a genius to figure out who's going to be your monkey boy for this trip."

III.

"It doesn't seem like much, does it?" Neva Balla said to Captain Sophia Coloma.

"You're referring to Earth Station," Coloma said to her executive officer.

"Yes, ma'am," Balla said. The two of them were on the bridge of the *Clarke,* stationed a safe distance from Earth Station, while the *Clarke*'s shuttle ferried diplomats back and forth.

"You grew up on Phoenix," Coloma said to Balla. "You're used to looking up and seeing Phoenix Station hanging there in your sky. Compared to that, any other station looks small."

"I grew up on the other side of the planet," Balla said. "I didn't see Phoenix Station with my own eyes until I was a teenager."

"My point is that Phoenix Station is your point of reference," Coloma said. "Earth Station is on the smaller side, but it's no smaller than stations over most of the colonies."

"The space elevator is interesting," Balla said, shifting the subject slightly. "Wonder why it's not used elsewhere."

"It's mostly political," Coloma said, and pointed at the beanstalk in the display. "The physics of the beanstalk are all wrong, according to standard physics. It should just drop out of the sky. The fact it doesn't is a reminder to the people of Earth how much more technologically advanced we are, so they avoid trying to get into it with us."

Balla snorted. "Doesn't seem to be working very well," she observed.

"Now they understand the physics of it," Coloma said. "The Perry incident solved that problem. Now they have a wealth and organization problem. They can't afford to build another beanstalk or a large enough space station, and if any one nation tried, the rest of them would scream their heads off."

"It's a mess," Balla said.

Coloma was about to agree when her PDA sounded. She glanced down at it; the flashing red-and-green banner indicated a confidential, high-priority message for her. Coloma stepped back to read the message. Balla, noting her captain's actions, focused on other tasks.

Coloma read the message, punched in her personal code to acknowledge receipt of it and then turned to her executive officer. "I need you to clear out the shuttle bay," she told Balla. "All crew out, no crew back in until I say so."

Balla raised her eyebrows at this but did not question the order. "The shuttle is scheduled to return in twenty-five minutes," she said.

"If I'm not done before then, have it hold ten klicks out until I clear it for docking," Coloma said.

"Yes, ma'am," Balla said.

"You have the bridge," Coloma said, and walked out.

Minutes later, Coloma eased herself into the chair in front of the command panel of the shuttle bay's control room and began the bay's purge cycle. The air in the bay sucked into compressed storage; the doors of the bay opened silently in the vacuum.

An unmanned cargo drone the size of a small personal vehicle slipped into the bay and settled onto the deck. Coloma closed the doors and repressurized the bay, then walked out of the control room toward the cargo drone.

The drone required identification to unlock. Coloma pressed her right hand against the lock and waited for it to scan her prints and blood vessel configuration. After a few seconds, it unlocked.

The first thing Coloma saw was the package for Lieutenant Harry Wilson, containing a pair of suits and 'bot canisters for his upcoming dive—for which, Coloma noted sourly, he would need her shuttle again. She disapproved of what happened to her shuttles when Wilson was involved.

Coloma pushed the thought, and Wilson's package, aside. She wasn't really there for them.

She was there for the other package, nestled alongside Wilson's. The one with her name on it.

• • •

"I'm supposed to be assisting you," Schmidt said to Wilson.

"You are assisting me," Wilson said. "By bringing me beer."

"Which is not going to happen again, by the way," Schmidt said, handing Wilson the IPA he'd gotten him from the bar. "I'm your assistant, not your beer boy."

"Thank you," Wilson said, taking the beer. He looked around the place. "The last time I was here, in this mess area, and I think at this very table, I saw my first alien. It was a Gehaar. It was a big day for me."

"You're not likely to see another Gehaar here," Schmidt said. "They're charter members of the Conclave."

"A shame," Wilson said. "They seemed like nice people. Messy eaters. But nice." He took a drink from his beer. "This is excellent. You can't get a good IPA in the Colonial Union. I have no idea why."

"Shall I fetch you some pretzels, O my master?" Schmidt asked.

"Not with that attitude," Wilson said. "Tell me what you found out about the state of the summit instead."

"It's madness, of course," Schmidt said. "They barely got through the welcome session before they ended up throwing out the agenda for the entire summit. The fact the Colonial Union is shopping around a lease on this station has disrupted things before they could even begin."

"Which is exactly what the Colonial Union wants," Wilson said. "Nobody's talking anymore about reparations to the Earth for keeping them down for so long."

"They're still talking about it, but nobody really cares," Schmidt said.

"So who are the early contenders?" Wilson asked. He took another sip from his beer.

"The United States, which is not entirely surprising," Schmidt said. "Although to cover their unilateral tracks, they're talking about roping in Canada, Japan and Australia for a coalition bid. The Europeans are putting their chips together, and so are China and the Siberian States. India is going it alone at the moment. After that it's a mess. Ambassador Abumwe has had most of Africa and Southeast Asia at her door, trying to schedule time with her in groups of three or four."

"So we'll have four or five days of this, at which point we'll suggest that the Earth diplomats should go back to their home countries, formalize their proposals and present them at a new round of negotiations," Wilson said. "They'll do a first round of eliminations, which will cause a shifting of alliances and proposals, each progressively more advantageous to the Colonial Union, until at the end of it we get most of the planet doing what we want, which is supplying us with soldiers and the occasional colonist."

"That does seem to be the plan," Schmidt said.

"Well done, Colonial Union," Wilson said. "I mean that in a realpolitik way, mind you."

"I got that," Schmidt said. "And what about you?"

"Me? I've been here," Wilson said, waving a hand to encompass the bar.

"I thought you were supposed to be meeting with the U.S. military guys," Schmidt said.

"Already met with them here," Wilson said. "Except for the one who'll be skydiving with me. Apparently he was delayed and will meet up with me later."

"How did it go?" Schmidt said.

"It was a bunch of soldiers drinking and telling war stories," Wilson said. "Boring, but comfortable and easy to navigate. Then they left, I stayed and now I'm listening to everyone who's come in here talk about the events of the day."

"It's a little loud for that," Schmidt said.

"Ah, but you don't have superhuman, genetically-engineered ears, now, do you," Wilson said. "And a computer in your head that can filter down anything you don't want to focus on."

Schmidt smiled. "All right, then," he said. "What are you hearing right now?"

"Aside from you complaining about having to fetch me beer," Wilson said, "there's a Dutch diplomat and a French diplomat behind me wondering whether the Europeans should let the Russians into their bid for the station, or whether the Russians will let bygones be bygones and join up with the Siberian States and China. Also behind me and to the left, an American diplomat has been hitting on an Indonesian diplomat for the last twenty minutes and appears to be entirely clueless that he's not going to be getting anything from anyone tonight, because he's a complete twit. And directly across from me, four soldiers from the Union of South African States have been drinking for an hour and wondering for the last ten minutes how to pick a fight with me and make it look like I started it."

"Wait, what?" Schmidt said.

"It's true," Wilson said. "To be fair, I *am* green. I *do* stand out in a crowd. Apparently these fellows have heard that Colonial Defense Forces soldiers are supposed to be incredibly badass, but they're looking at me and they don't see it. No, sir, they don't see it at *all*. So they want to pick a fight with me and see how tough I really am. Purely for the sake of inquiry, I'm sure."

"What are you going to do about it?" Schmidt asked, looking over at the soldiers Wilson was speaking of.

"I'm going to sit here and drink my beer and keep listening to conversations," Wilson said. "I'm not worried, Hart."

"There are four of them," Schmidt said. "And they don't look like nice people."

"They're harmless enough," Wilson said. He swallowed a large portion of his IPA and set the glass down, then appeared to listen to

something for a minute. "Oh, okay. They've just decided to do it. Here they come."

"Great," Schmidt said, watching as the four men stood up from their table.

"Relax, Hart," Wilson said. "It's not you they want to punch out."

"I can still be collateral damage," Schmidt said.

"Don't worry, I'll protect you," Wilson said.

"My hero," Schmidt said, sarcastically.

"Hey," one of the soldiers said, to Wilson. "Are you one of those Colonial Defense Forces soldiers?"

"No, I just like the color green," Wilson said. He finished the rest of his beer and looked regretfully at the empty glass.

"It's a fair question," the soldier said.

"You're Kruger, right?" Wilson said, setting down the glass.

"What?" said the soldier, momentarily confused.

"Sure you are," Wilson said. "I recognize the voice." He pointed to another one. "That would make you Goosen, I'd guess. You're probably Mothudi"—he pointed at another, and then at the final one —"and that would make you Pandit. Did I get everyone right?"

"How did you know that?" Kruger asked.

"I was listening in to your conversation," Wilson said, standing up. "You know, the one where you were trying to figure out how to make it look like I started swinging at you first, so you could all try to kick the shit out of me."

"We never said that," said Pandit.

"Sure you did," Wilson said. He turned and gave Schmidt his glass. "Would you get me another?" he asked.

"Okay," Schmidt said, taking the glass but not taking his eyes off the four soldiers.

Wilson turned back to the soldiers. "You guys want anything? I'm buying."

"I said, we didn't say that," Pandit said.

"You did, actually," Wilson said.

"Are you calling me a liar?" Pandit asked, agitated.

"It's pretty clear I am, now, isn't it?" Wilson said. "So: Drinks?… Anyone?… No?" He turned back to Schmidt. "Just me, then. But, you know, get something for yourself."

"I'll take my time," Schmidt said.

"Eh," Wilson said. "This won't take long."

Pandit grabbed Wilson's shoulder, and Wilson let himself be spun around. "I don't appreciate being called a liar in front of my friends," Pandit said. He took his hand off Wilson's shoulder.

"Then don't lie in front of your friends," Wilson said. "It's pretty simple, actually."

"I think you owe Pandit here an apology," Kruger said.

"For what?" Wilson said. "For accurately representing what he said? I don't think so."

"Mate, you're going to find it in your best interest to apologize," Goosen said.

"It's not going to happen," Wilson said.

"Then I think we're going to have a problem here," Goosen said.

"You mean, *now* you're going to try to beat the crap out of me?" Wilson said. "Shocked, I am. If you had just admitted this up front, we could be done by now."

"We're not going to *try* anything," said Mothudi.

"Of course not," Wilson said. He squeezed the bridge of his nose as if exasperated. "Gentlemen. I want you to notice that there are four of you and one of me. I also want you to notice that I am not the slightest bit concerned that a quartet of clearly experienced military muscleheads such as yourselves are planning to attempt to pummel me into dogmeat. Now, what does that *mean*? One, it could mean that I'm absolutely delusional. Two, it could mean that you really haven't the slightest idea what you're getting into. Which is it? You get to choose."

The four soldiers looked at one another and grinned. "We're going to go with absolutely delusional," Kruger said.

"Fine," Wilson said. He walked into the wide public corridor directly in front of the bar. The four soldiers watched him walk away, confused. Wilson turned to look at them. "Well, don't just stand there like morons," he said. "Get out here."

The four of them walked out to him, hesitant. Wilson waved them closer. "Come on, guys," he said. "Don't act like you didn't want this. Gather round."

"What are we doing?" Goosen asked, uncertain.

"You guys want a crack at me," Wilson said. "Okay, so, here's the deal. Spread yourselves out any way you like. Then one of you tries to hit me. If you can hit me without me blocking you, you get to hit me again. But if I block you, then it's my turn. I have to hit all four of you without any of you blocking me. If any of you block me, it's your turn again. Got it?"

"Why are we doing it this way?" Mothudi asked.

"Because this way it looks like we're having harmless high jinks rather than the four of you attempting to start a war between Earth and the Colonial Union by randomly assaulting a CDF soldier," Wilson said. "I think that's wise, don't you? So, go ahead now, position yourselves."

The four soldiers spread out in a semicircle in front of Wilson.

"Anytime," Wilson said.

"Harry Wilson?" said a female voice.

Wilson turned to look. Kruger rushed him, arms raised. Wilson blocked Kruger and put him on his back. Kruger exhaled in surprise.

"Attacking while I was distracted," Wilson said. "Nice. Futile, but nice." He hauled Kruger back up and pushed him back into his old position. Then he returned his attention to the woman who addressed him.

"Danielle Lowen," he said. "What a pleasant surprise."

"All right, I give up," Lowen said. She was standing with a man wearing a uniform. "What exactly are you doing?"

"I'm embarrassing these four knuckledraggers," Wilson said.

"Do you need any help?" the man next to Lowen asked.

"No, I'm good," Wilson said, and Mothudi took a lunge at him. Mothudi was on the deck shortly thereafter. "You went out of turn," Wilson said, mildly, to him. He got off Mothudi's neck and let him crawl back into position. Then he looked back to Lowen. "Where are you two off to?" he asked.

"Actually, we were looking for you," Lowen said, and nodded to the man standing with her. "This is Captain David Hirsch, United States Air Force. Also, my cousin."

"You're the one taking the high dive with me," Wilson said.

"That's right," Hirsch said.

"Nice to meet you," Wilson said.

"Hey," Kruger said. "Are we fighting here or what?"

"Sorry," Wilson said to him, and turned back to Hirsch and Lowen. "Excuse me for a minute."

"Take your time," Hirsch said.

"Will take no time at all," Wilson said. He faced the four soldiers again. "Three rounds," he said.

"What?" said Kruger.

"Three rounds," Wilson repeated. "As in, I hit all of you three times each and we're done. I've got people to see, and you probably need to practice breathing through your mouths or something. So, three rounds. Okay?"

"Whatever," Kruger said.

"Good," Wilson said, and smacked each of them across the face, hard, before they knew what hit them. They stood, holding their cheeks, stunned.

"That's one," Wilson said. "Here comes round two."

"Wai—," Kruger began, and the end of the word was lost in multiple smacking sounds.

"Okay, that's two," Wilson said. "Ready for three?"

"Fuck this," Goosen said, and all four men rushed Wilson simultaneously.

"Aaaaand that's three," Wilson said, to the four, who were all on the deck, clutching their necks and gasping. "Don't worry, guys, your tracheas are just bruised. You'll be fine in a day. Well, two days. Don't rush it. So, we're done here?… Guys?"

Kruger vomited onto the deck.

"I'm going to take that as a 'yes,'" Wilson said. He reached down and patted the back of Kruger's head. "Thanks for the workout, kids. It's been fun. Don't worry, I'll see myself out." He stood back up and walked over to Lowen and Hirsch.

"That was impressive," Hirsch said.

"What's really going to disturb you is that I am the Colonial Defense Forces version of totally out of shape," Wilson said. "I've spent the last several years as a lab nerd."

"It's true," Lowen said. "He barely moved at all the last time I saw him."

"I did drink you under the table," Wilson reminded her.

"And ignored the pass I was making at you," Lowen said.

"I'm not that kind of boy," Wilson said.

"I'm not sure I want to be around for this conversation," Hirsch said.

"It's just banter," Wilson assured him.

"Coward," Lowen said, smiling.

"Speaking of which, my friend Hart is back in the bar, holding a beer for me," Wilson said. "Care to join us?" He jerked a thumb back at the four soldiers, still prone on the deck. "I tried to buy them beers, but they refused. Now look at them."

"I think we'll join you," Hirsch said. "If only out of self-defense."

"Wise," Wilson said. "Very wise."

IV.

"You wanted to see me," Abumwe said to Coloma.

"Yes," Coloma said. "I'm sorry to take you away from your commitments."

"You didn't," Abumwe said. "I had scheduled an hour to eat and relax. This is it. And after forty minutes of a delegate from Kenya explaining to me how that country should be *given* Earth Station, on account of the space elevator having its base in Nairobi, anything you have to say to me will be a stream of clear rationality by comparison."

"I've been drafted," Coloma said.

"I withdraw my previous assertion," Abumwe said. "What do you mean, drafted?"

Coloma showed Abumwe her PDA, open to the order from the CDF. "The Colonial Defense Forces, with permission from the Department of State, has at least temporarily classified the *Clarke* as a CDF ship, and has at least temporarily drafted me into the service. Same rank, and I share a joint designation as captain with the Colonial Union's civilian service, so none of my crew has to be drafted to follow my orders. I've also been ordered to keep this drafting, and the new designation for the *Clarke,* in strict secrecy."

"You're telling me," Abumwe observed.

"No, I'm not," Coloma said.

"Understood," Abumwe said.

"Whatever this is involves you and your people," Coloma said. "Orders or not, you need to know."

"Why do you think the CDF has done this?" Abumwe asked.

"Because I think they expect something," Coloma said. "We sacrificed the *Clarke* at Danavar—the former *Clarke*—when someone set a trap for the Utche. We don't know who. *This* ship was used by the CDF to try to ferret out a spy in their own ranks, unsuccessfully. When the Earth delegation came onto the ship, one of their own murdered another of their own, and tried to frame us for it, for reasons that have never been made clear to us. And then there was the *Urse Damay,* which fired on us when we were meeting with the Conclave, and controlled by forces unknown."

"We're not to blame for any of those," Abumwe said. "Those weren't about us in particular."

"No, of course not," Coloma agreed. "We've been in the wrong place at the wrong time. But in each case some outside, unknown group has been manipulating events for their own purpose. The same group? Separate groups? If separate, working together or apart? And to what end? And now we're here, meeting with representatives from Earth. We know there's still a spy within the CDF. We know that on Earth, someone is also pulling strings."

"And if either is going to make a statement or an action, this would be the time and the place," Abumwe concluded.

Coloma nodded. "Even more so because the Colonial Defense Forces have no ships at Earth Station and no personnel, other than Lieutenant Wilson."

"And now you," Abumwe said.

"Right," Coloma said. "My primary orders are to pay close attention to any incoming ships. They've given me a schedule of every ship, from the Colonial Union or elsewhere, that is expected at Earth Station in the next ninety-six hours. They've also given me access to Earth Station's flight control systems, so I can track ship communications. If anything looks suspicious, I'm to alert Earth Station and ping a drone they've placed at skip distance, which will immediately skip back to Phoenix Station."

"There's the possibility that the threat might come from Earth, not outside of it," Abumwe said. "The beanstalk to Earth Station has been bombed before. There are riots happening on Earth right now because of this summit and the CDF. Any of that could be cover for an event."

"It's possible, but I don't think that's the CDF's main concern. I think whoever it is that's modeling this over there thinks an attack from a ship is the likely play," Coloma said.

"What makes you sure?" Abumwe asked.

"Because the CDF gave me something else besides orders," Coloma said.

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"So what the hell is the Colonial Union really up to?" Lowen asked Wilson. They, Schmidt and Hirsch were on their third round together at the bar.

Wilson smiled and leaned back in his chair. "This is the place where I'm supposed to feign surprise and exclaim that the Colonial Union is acting only from the best and purest motives, right?"

"Smart-ass," Lowen said.

Wilson raised his glass to her. "You know me so well," he said.

"It's a serious question, though," Lowen said.

"I know," Wilson said. "And my serious answer is that you know as much about it as I do." He motioned to Schmidt. "As either of us does."

"We got our new directives about an hour before we set foot on Earth Station," Schmidt said. "We were taken as much by surprise on this as you folks were."

"Why would you do it that way?" Hirsch asked. "I'm not a diplomat, so I might be missing out on some deep-level chess moves, but it seems like you guys are flying by the seat of your pants, here."

"That's what it's *supposed* to look like," Lowen said. "Spring the idea of leasing the station here on the delegations from Earth to disrupt their plans to act in concert addressing legitimate grievances they have with the Colonial Union. Spring it on the actual diplomats from the Colonial Union so they don't have any real authority to do anything other than listen to the Earth delegations grovel for a shot at the station lease. Change the conversation and change the direction of how Earth sees the Colonial Union. No, David, it's supposed to look like confusion. But I'd bet you long odds that the Colonial Union's been planning this little strategy for a long time. And for right now it's working exactly how they wanted it to." She drank from her beer.

"Sorry," Wilson said.

"I don't blame *you,*" Lowen said. "You're just a tool like all the rest of us are. Although you seem to be having more fun than most at this point."

"He's been drinking beer and beating up people," Schmidt said. "What's not to like?"

"This from a man who hid at the bar while I was taking on four guys at once," Wilson said.

"You told me to go," Schmidt said. "I was just following orders."

"And anyway, Captain Hirsch here and I will be doing some very important business tomorrow," Wilson said.

"That's right," Hirsch agreed. "Come fourteen hundred hours, Lieutenant Wilson and I will jump out of a perfectly good space station."

"It's the first step that gets you," Wilson said.

"I'm not worried about the stepping," Hirsch said. "I'm mildly concerned about the landing."

"Well, leave that to me," Wilson said.

"I have to leave it to you," Hirsch pointed out. "You're the one with the computer in your head."

"What does that mean?" Lowen said.

"The suits we'll be inside of are controlled by a BrainPal," Wilson said, tapping his temple. "Unfortunately your cousin lacks one, and doesn't seem likely to get one between now and the jump. So I'll be controlling the deployment of both suits."

Lowen looked at her cousin and then back at Wilson. "Is that safe?" she asked.

"We're dropping to the Earth from the darkness of space," Wilson said. "What about this is safe?"

Hirsch cleared his throat, loudly and obviously.

"What I meant to say is, of course it's safe," Wilson said. "Couldn't be safer. Safer than going to the bathroom. Lots of people die pooping, you know. Happens every day."

Lowen narrowed her eyes at Wilson. "I'm not supposed to say this, but David is my favorite cousin," she said.

"I'm telling Rachel," Hirsch said.

"Your sister owes me money," Lowen said. "Now shut up. I'm threatening Harry, here." Hirsch grinned and shut up. "As I was saying, David's my favorite cousin. If something happens to him, I'm going to have to come for you, Harry. And I won't be as easy on you as those four soldiers were. I will, and this is a promise, kick your ass."

"Have you ever kicked anyone's ass?" Hirsch asked. "Ever? You were always kind of a girly-girl."

Lowen slugged Hirsch in the arm. "I've been saving my kick-assery up for a special occasion," she said. "This could be it. You should feel honored."

"Oh, I do feel honored," Hirsch said.

"If you're so honored, you can get the next round," Lowen said.

"I'm not sure I'm *that* honored," Hirsch said.

Lowen looked shocked. "I threaten a Colonial Defense Forces soldier for you, and you won't even get me a beer? That's it, you no longer have official favorite-cousin status. Rachel is back on top."

"I thought she owed you money," Hirsch said.

"Yes, but *you* owe me a beer," Lowen said.

"Family," Hirsch said, to Wilson and Schmidt, and then got up. "Anything for you two?"

"I'll get Harry's," Schmidt said, getting up. "Come on, David. Walk you to the bar." The two of them made their way through the crowd toward the beer taps.

"He seems like a good guy," Wilson said, to Lowen.

"He is," Lowen said. "And I'm serious, Harry. Don't let anything happen to him."

Wilson held up his hand, as if pledging. "I swear I will not let anything happen to your cousin. Or at the very least, if anything happens to him, it will happen to me, too," he said.

"That last part doesn't inspire me with confidence," Lowen said.

"It will be fine, I promise," Wilson said. "The last time I did this, people were shooting at me on my way down. I missed having a leg blown off by millimeters. This will be a cakewalk compared to that."

"I still don't like it," Lowen said.

"I sympathize entirely," Wilson said. "This wasn't exactly my idea, you know. But, look. David and I will have to get together tomorrow before the jump anyway in order to go over dive protocols and to walk him through what we'll be doing. In your ample spare time, why don't you tag along with him? I'll give the impression I know what I'm talking about, I swear."

Lowen pulled out her PDA and scrolled through her schedule. "Can you do it at eleven?" she asked. "I have a fifteen-minute hole in my schedule then. I was going to use it to pee, but I can do this instead."

"I'm not responsible for your bladder," Wilson said.

"I'll keep that in mind," Lowen said. She put her PDA away. "At least I have time to pee. There are some people I know who have so many meetings now that they're positively at risk for peritonitis."

"Busy schedules," Wilson said.

"Yes, well," Lowen said. "This is what happens when one party drops a bomb onto everyone's schedule and turns what was going to be an orderly summit into a goddamned mess, Harry."

"Sorry," Wilson said again.

"This goes back to that arrogance thing," Lowen said. "You remember. You and I talked about this before. The Colonial Union's biggest problem is its arrogance. This is a perfect example. Rather than sit down with the nations of the Earth to discuss the ramifications of keeping us bottled up for centuries, it's attempting a sleight-of-hand maneuver, distracting us with this station lease."

"I remember also saying to you that if you wanted someone to defend the Colonial Union's practices, you came to the wrong shop," Wilson said. "Although I'll note, strictly as a matter of observation, that the Colonial Union's plan seems to be working perfectly."

"It's working *now,*" Lowen said. "I'm willing to concede it's a reasonable short-term solution. But as a long-term solution it has problems."

"Such as," Wilson said.

"Such as what is the Colonial Union going to do when the United States, China and Europe all say that as a matter of restitution, the Colonial Union should *give* us Earth Station?" Lowen said. "Forget all this leasing crap. The cost of one space station is a substantial discount on the profits accrued from two centuries of essentially free labor and security for the Colonial Union. You'd be getting off cheap."

"I'm not sure the Colonial Union will agree with that theory," Wilson said.

"We don't need you to agree," Lowen said. "All we really have to do is wait. The Colonial Union is unsustainable without new colonists and soldiers. I'm sure your economists and military planners have figured this one out already. You need us more than we need you."

"I would imagine the natural response to this would be that you wouldn't like what happens to Earth if the Colonial Union fails," Wilson said.

"If it was just the Earth, you'd be right," Lowen said. "But there's option B."

"You mean joining the Conclave," Wilson said.

"Yep," Lowen said.

"The Earth would have to get itself a lot more organized than it is at the moment," Wilson said. "The Conclave doesn't like having to deal with fractions of a planet."

"I think we could be sufficiently motivated," Lowen said. "If the alternatives were either a forced alliance with former oppressors, or being collateral damage when that former oppressor falls."

"But then humanity is divided," Wilson said. "That's not going to be good."

"For whom?" Lowen countered. "For humanity? Or for the Colonial Union? They're not the same thing, you know. If there is a

human division, in the end, who will be to blame for it? Not *us,* Harry. Not Earth."

"You don't have to sell me, Dani," Wilson said. "So, how is this line of argument going with the U.S. delegation?" Wilson asked.

Lowen frowned.

"Ah," Wilson said.

"You would think nepotism would help me out here," Lowen said. "Being the daughter of the U.S. secretary of state should have a perk or two, especially when I'm right. But there's the minor problem that Dad is under orders to tell us to try to hammer out a deal before the end of the summit. He says my points will make a fine 'backup plan' if we don't end up getting the lease outright."

"Does he mean it?" Wilson asked.

Lowen frowned again.

"Ah," Wilson said once more.

"Oh, good, our drinks are here," Lowen said, motioning to Hirsch and Schmidt, who were navigating back, beers in hand. "Just in time to drown my sorrows."

"Did we miss anything?" Hirsch asked, handing his cousin a beer.

"I was just talking about how hard it is to be right all the time," Lowen said.

"You were talking to the right guy about that," Schmidt said, sitting down. "Harry has the same problem. Just ask him."

"Well, then," Lowen said, and raised her glass. "I propose a toast. Here's to being right all the time. May God and history forgive us."

They all clinked glasses to that.

PART TWO

V.

"Captain Coloma," Ensign Lemuel said, "another ship skipped in."

Coloma muttered her thanks to Lemuel and checked her PDA. She had made it a standing order to her bridge crew to alert her when ships

arrived or departed Earth Station, without giving them further explanation. The crew didn't question the order; it was trivially easy to track the other ships. The order had been in effect for most of a day now. It was late morning on the second day of the summit.

Coloma's display registered the new ship, a small freighter. It was one of eleven ships floating outside of Earth Station, the other ten arrayed in parking zones. There were four Colonial Union diplomatic ships; including the *Clarke,* there was the *Aberforth,* the *Zhou* and the *Schulz*, each carrying its complement of diplomats negotiating with the delegations from Earth, who came to the station by way of the beanstalk. Three ships, the *Robin Meisner,* the *Leaping Dolphin* and the *Rus Argo,* were cargo freighters from the Colonial Union, which had some limited trade with the Earth. The two remaining ships were Budek cargo haulers; the Budek were negotiating to join the Conclave but in the meantime were fans of citrus fruits.

In her earpiece, Coloma could hear Earth Station's flight controller ask the new ship to identify itself: the first red flag. Colonial Union cargo ships had encrypted transponders that the station would ping as soon as the ship skipped into its space. The fact that control was asking for identification meant it either had no transponder or had disabled it. It also meant the ship was an unscheduled arrival. If it had been scheduled but was without a transponder, control would have hailed it under the expected name.

Coloma had the *Clarke* scan the new ship and ran the data against a specific database of ships given to her by the CDF. It took less than a second for a match to pop up. The ship was the *Erie Morningstar,* a civilian transport and cargo ship that had gone missing months earlier. The *Erie Morningstar* had started its life as a CDF cruiser more than seventy years prior; for civilian use, it was gutted and reconfigured for cargo-carrying purposes.

It didn't mean it could not be reconfigured back into combat.

Earth Station was now hailing the *Erie Morningstar* for the third time, to no response, which satisfied Coloma that the ship was now

officially in the "suspicious" territory.

"Captain, new ship skipped in," Lemuel said.

"Another one?" Coloma asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Lemuel said. "Uh, and another … two … ma'am, I have a bunch skipping in pretty much simultaneously."

Coloma looked down at her display. There were eight new contacts there. As she watched, two new contacts lit up, and then another two.

In her earpiece, Coloma could hear Earth Station control cursing. There was an edge of panic to the voice.

Now there were fifteen new contacts to go with the *Erie Morningstar*.

Coloma's database from the CDF had sixteen ships on it.

She didn't bother running the other fifteen.

"Where's our shuttle?" Coloma asked.

"It just docked at Earth Station and is prepping to return," Lemuel said.

"Tell it to hold and prepare to bring back our people," Coloma said.

"How many of them?" Lemuel asked.

"All of them," Coloma said, ordered the *Clarke* on emergency alert and sent an urgent message to Ambassador Abumwe.

• • •

Ambassador Abumwe was listening to the Tunisian representative discuss her country's plans for Earth Station when her PDA vibrated in three short bursts followed by one long one. Abumwe picked up the PDA and swiped it open to read the message there from Captain Coloma.

Big trouble, it said. *Sixteen ships. Get your people out now. Shuttle at gate seven. It leaves in ten minutes. Anyone still there after that stays there*.

"Go back to the beanstalk," Abumwe said, looking at the Tunisian representative.

"Excuse me?" the Tunisian representative said.

"I said, go back to the beanstalk," Abumwe repeated, and then stood up. "Get on the first elevator down. Don't stop. Don't wait."

"What's happening?" the Tunisian representative asked, but Abumwe was already out the door, sending a global message to her team.

VI.

"You look like you're in a unitard," Danielle Lowen said to Harry Wilson, pointing to his combat suit as he and Hart Schmidt came up to her and David Hirsch. The four of them were meeting in an otherwise unoccupied cargo hold of Earth Station.

"The curious reason for that is because I am in a unitard," Wilson said. He stopped in front of her and dropped the large canvas bag he was carrying. "That's what our combat suit is. This one is actually a heavy-duty combat suit, designed for vacuum work."

"Do you engage in dance battles?" Lowen asked. "Because if you did, I think that would be stupendous."

"Sadly, no," Wilson said. "And we're all the lesser for it."

"So I'm going to have to put one of those on," Hirsch said, pointing to the combat suit.

"Only if you want to live," Wilson said. "It's optional otherwise."

"I think I'll choose life," Hirsch said.

"Probably the right choice," Wilson said. He reached into the bag he was carrying and handed Hirsch the unitard within it. "This is yours."

"It's a little small," Hirsch said, taking the article and looking at it doubtfully.

"It will expand to fit," Wilson said. "That will fit you, or Hart, or Dani. One size really does fit all. It also features a cowl, which when I activate it will cover your face entirely. Try not to freak out when that happens."

"Got it," Hirsch said.

"Good," Wilson said. "You want to put it on now?"

"I think I'll wait," Hirsch said, and handed it back.

"Chicken," Wilson said, taking and storing it back in the bag and pulling out another object.

"That looks like a parachute," Hirsch said.

"Functionally, you are correct," Wilson said. "Literally, not. This is your store of nanobots. When you hit the atmosphere, they release and form a heat shield around you to keep you from burning up. Once you make it into the troposphere, then they form into a parachute and you'll glide down. We'll be landing at a football field outside of Nairobi. I understand some of your friends will have a helicopter standing by to take me back to the beanstalk."

"Yes," Hirsch said. "Sorry it won't be a longer stay."

"It'll still be good to hit the home soil," Wilson said. He set down the 'bot pack and reached in for one more object. "Supplementary oxygen," he said. "Because it's a long way down."

"Thank you for thinking of that," Hirsch said.

"You're welcome," Wilson said.

"It doesn't seem like a lot of oxygen," Lowen said, looking at it.

"It's not," Wilson said. "When the combat suit is covering his face, it will sequester the carbon dioxide and recirculate the oxygen. He won't need as much."

"It's a handy suit," Lowen said. "Shame it looks so silly."

"She's right, you know," Schmidt said.

"Don't you start, Hart," Wilson said, and then both his BrainPal and Schmidt's PDA went off in alarm. Wilson accessed his message, from Ambassador Abumwe.

Sixteen unidentified ships have appeared around Earth Station, it said. *Stop what you're doing and head to gate seven. The shuttle leaves in ten minutes. Do not wait. Do not start a panic. Just go. Now.*

Wilson looked over to Schmidt, who had just finished his message. Schmidt looked back, alarmed. Wilson quickly put everything back into his canvas bag.

Lowen caught their expressions. "What is it?" she said.

"There might be trouble," Wilson said, hefting the bag.

"What kind of trouble?" Hirsch said.

"Sixteen mysterious ships suddenly appearing outside the window kind of trouble," Wilson said.

Lowen's and Hirsch's PDAs sounded. They both reached for them. "Read them while walking," Wilson suggested. "Come on." The four of them made their way out of the cargo hold and headed to the main corridor of the station.

"I'm being told to head to the beanstalk elevators," Lowen said.

"So am I," Hirsch said. "We're evacuating the station."

The four of them walked through a maintenance door into the main corridor, and into chaos. Word had spread, and quickly. A stream of Earth citizens, with looks ranging from concern to panic, were beginning to push their way toward the beanstalk elevator entry areas.

"That doesn't look good," Wilson said, and started walking purposefully against the general rush. "Come on. We're going to our shuttle at gate seven. Come with us. We'll get you on our shuttle."

"I can't," Hirsch said, stopping. The others stopped with him. "My team has been ordered to assist the evacuation. I have to go to the beanstalk."

"I'll go with you," Lowen said.

"No," Hirsch said. "Harry's right, it's a mess, and it's going to get messier. Go with him and Hart." He went in to give his cousin a hug and a quick peck on the cheek. "See you soon, Dani." He looked over to Wilson. "Get her out of here," he said.

"We will," Wilson said. Hirsch nodded and headed down the corridor, toward the beanstalk elevators.

"Gate seven is still a quarter of the way around the station," Schmidt said. "We need to start running."

"Let's run," Wilson agreed. Schmidt took off, weaving through holes in the crowd. Wilson followed, keeping pace with, and making a path for, Lowen.

"Will you have room for me?" Lowen asked.

"We'll make room," Wilson said.

• • •

"They're not doing anything," Balla said to Coloma, staring at the sixteen ships. "Why aren't they doing anything?"

"They're waiting," Coloma said.

"Waiting for what?" Balla asked.

"I don't know yet," Coloma said.

"You knew about this, didn't you," Balla said. "You've been having us count off ships as they came in. You were looking for this."

Coloma shook her head. "The CDF told me to be looking for *a* ship," she said. "Their intelligence suggested a single ship might attack or disrupt the summit, like a single ship tried to disrupt our meeting with the Conclave. A single ship would be all that would be needed, so a single ship is what they prepared me for. This"—Coloma waved at the display, with sixteen ships hovering silently—"is not what I was expecting."

"You sent a skip drone," Balla said. "That will bring the cavalry."

"I sent the data to the drone," Coloma said. "The drone is at skip distance. It will take two hours for the data to get to the drone, and it will take them at least that long to decide to send any ships. Whatever is going to happen here is going to be done by then. We're on our own."

"What are we going to do?" Balla said.

"We're going to wait," Coloma said. "Get me a report from our shuttle."

"It's filling up," Balla said, after a minute. "We're missing two or three people. We're coming close to our deadline. What do you want to do?"

"Keep the shuttle there as long as you can," Coloma said.

"Yes, ma'am," Balla said.

"Let Abumwe know we're holding on for her stragglers, but that we'll have to seal up if things get hot," Coloma said.

"Yes, Captain," Balla said, and then pointed at a display that was focused on the station itself. From the bottom of the station there was movement. A car on the elevator was making its way down the beanstalk. "It looks like they're evacuating people through the elevator."

Coloma watched the elevator car descend silently for a moment and then felt a thought enter her head with such blinding assurance that it felt like a physical blow. "Tell the shuttle pilot to seal up and go now," she said.

"Ma'am?" Balla said.

"Now, Neva!" Coloma said. "Now! Now!"

"Captain, missile launch!" said weapons desk officer Lao. "Six missiles, headed for the station."

"Not to the station," Coloma said. "Not yet."

• • •

"Stuff them in," David Hirsch said, to Sergeant Belinda Thompson. "Pack them in like it's a Tokyo subway."

The two of them had been assigned to keep order at the elevator cars, which were "cars" in only the strictest sense. Each of the cars was more like a large conference room in size, torus shaped around its cable. The car could comfortably fit a hundred or so; Hirsch planned on jamming in twice that number. He and Thompson shoved people in, none too gently, and yelled at them to go all the way to the back of the car.

A thrumming vibration in Hirsch's soles told him that one of the other elevator cars was finally under way, sliding down the cable toward Nairobi and to safety. *Two hundred fewer people to worry about,* he thought, and smiled. This was not the day he'd been planning to have.

"What are you smiling about?" Thompson wanted to know, shoving another diplomat into the car.

"Life is full of little surpris—," Hirsch said, and then was sucked out into space as six missiles targeting the departed elevator car smashed into the car, destroying it, and into the beanstalk cable, wrenching it askew and sending a wave up the cable into the car-boarding area. The wave tore open the deck, sending Hirsch and several others tumbling into the vacuum and tearing open the deck, crushing the car Hirsch and Thompson had been filling into the hull of the boarding area. The air sucked out of the gash, launching several unfortunates into the space below the station.

The station's automatic overrides took control, sealing off the elevator-boarding area, dooming everyone in it—three or four hundred of Earth's diplomatic corps—to death by asphyxiation.

Elsewhere in Earth Station, airtight bulkheads deployed, sealing off sections of the station, and the people in them, in the hope of stanching the loss of atmosphere to only a few areas and protecting the rest still inside from the hard vacuum of the outside cosmos.

For how long was the question.

VII.

Wilson felt rather than saw the emergency bulkhead springing up in front of him and saw Hart Schmidt on the other side of it. Wilson grabbed Lowen and tried to push his way through the now thoroughly panicked crowd, but the mob pushed him and Lowen back and into their flow. Wilson had just enough time to see the shock on Schmidt's face as the bottom and top bulkheads slammed shut, separating the two of them. Wilson yelled at Schmidt to get to the shuttle. Schmidt didn't hear it over the din.

Around Wilson, the screams of the people near him reached a crescendo as they realized the bulkheads had sealed them off. They were trapped in this section of Earth Station.

Wilson looked at Lowen, who had gone ashen. She realized the same thing everyone else had.

He looked around and realized that they were at shuttle gate five.

No shuttle here, Wilson thought. Then he thought of something else.

"Come on," he said to Lowen, grabbing her hand again. He went perpendicular to the crowd, toward the shuttle gate. Lowen followed bonelessly. Wilson checked the doorway at the shuttle gate and found it unlocked. He pulled it open, pushed Lowen through it and closed it, he hoped, before any of the mob could see him.

The shuttle area was cold and empty. Wilson set down the bag he was carrying and began to dig through it. "Dani," he said, and then looked up after he got no response. "Dani!" he said, more forcefully. She glanced over to him, a lost look in her eyes. "I need you to take off your clothes," he said.

This snapped her out of her shock. "Excuse me?" she said.

Wilson smiled; his inappropriate remark had gotten the response he'd hoped for. "I need you to take off your clothes because I need you to get into this," he said, holding up the CDF combat unitard.

"Why?" Lowen said, and a second later her eyes widened. "No," she began.

"*Yes,*" Wilson said, forcefully. "The station is under attack, Dani. We're sealed off. Whoever's doing this has the ability to peel the skin off this station like an orange. We missed our ride. If we're getting off this thing, there's only one way to do it. We're jumping off."

"I don't know how," Lowen said.

"You don't have to know how, because I do," Wilson said, and held up the unitard. "All you have to do is get into this. And hurry, because I don't think we have a whole lot of time."

Lowen nodded, took the unitard and started unbuttoning her blouse. Wilson turned away.

"Harry," Lowen said.

Wilson turned his head back slightly. "Yeah?"

"For the record, this was not really how I planned to get undressed with you," Lowen said.

"Really," Wilson said. "Because this was how I planned it all along."

Lowen laughed a shaky, exhausted laugh. Wilson turned away, to let Lowen retain her modesty and so she couldn't see the expression on his face as he tried to ping Hart Schmidt.

• • •

Earth Station gave a shudder, sirens went off and that was enough for Jastine Goeth, the *Clarke*'s shuttle pilot. "Buttoning up now," she said, and sealed the door to the shuttle.

"I have two people left," Abumwe said. "We wait for them."

"We're leaving," Goeth said.

"I don't think you heard me," Abumwe said, using her coldest *Don't fuck with me* voice.

"I heard you," Goeth said, as she worked her departure sequence. "You want to wait? I'll unseal the door for you for five seconds so you can get out. But I am *going,* Ambassador. This place is blowing up around us. I don't plan to be here when it breaks apart. Now leave or shut up. You can string me up later, but right now this is my ship. Sit down and let me work."

Abumwe stared at Goeth for several seconds in cold fury, which Goeth ignored. Then she turned, glared one of her staff out of a seat and sat.

Goeth pushed the "Emergency Purge" option on her control panel, which overrode the station's standard purge cycle. There was a bang as the shuttle bay's outside portal irised open with the bay's atmosphere still inside, sucking out through the dilating door. Goeth didn't wait for it to open all the way. She jammed the shuttle through, damaging the door as she went. She did not believe at this point that it would matter.

• • •

Schmidt saw the bulkheads go up, saw Harry yell something at him he couldn't hear and then took off running again toward gate seven, which

he could see at the far end of the section. Schmidt knew at this point that his time had likely expired, but he still had to get there to see for himself.

Which was how Schmidt saw the shuttle leave, through the wide window of the seating area just as he came up to the gate.

"So close," Schmidt whispered, and could barely register the words over the screams of those trapped in the section with him. They were all going to die in here together.

He wished they wouldn't be so loud about it.

Schmidt looked at the seating area, shrugged to himself and collapsed onto one of the benches, staring up at the ceiling of the gate area. He'd missed his ride by a matter of seconds. It was sort of appropriate, he supposed. At the end of the day, he was always half a step behind.

Somewhere in the section, he could hear someone sobbing, loudly, terrified of the moment. Schmidt registered it but didn't feel the emotion himself. If this was the end, it wasn't the worst end he could imagine. He wasn't scared about it. He just wished it weren't so soon.

Schmidt's PDA went off; the tone told him it was Wilson. *The lucky bastard,* Schmidt thought. He had no doubt that even now Harry was figuring out some way out of this. Schmidt loved his friend Harry, admired him and even looked up to him in his way. But right now, at what looked like the end of his days, he found the last thing he actually wanted to do was talk to him.

• • •

"Two new missiles launched," Lao said. "They're heading for our shuttle."

"Of course they are," Coloma said. Whoever was doing this wanted to make some sort of point about people leaving Earth Station.

Fortunately, Coloma didn't have to stand for it.

She went to her personal display, marked the missiles heading toward the shuttle and marked the ship that had fired them. She pulled

up a command panel on her display and pressed a button.

The missiles vaporized and the ship that launched them blossomed into flame.

"What was that?" Balla said.

"Neva, tell the shuttle pilot to go to Earth," Coloma said. "These ships are firing Melierax missiles. They're not rated for atmosphere. They'll burn up. Get that shuttle as deep into the atmosphere as it can go, as fast as it can go."

Balla passed on the order and then looked back at her captain.

"I told you the CDF was expecting one ship. So they gave me one of their new toys: a drone that fires a beam of antimatter particles. It's been floating alongside the *Clarke* since yesterday. I think they wanted it to have a field test."

"I think it works," Balla said.

"The problem is that it has about six shots to it," Coloma said. "I put a beam to each of the missiles and three beams into that ship. I've got another shot left, if I'm lucky. If there was just one ship out there, that wouldn't be an issue. But there are fifteen others. And I've just made the *Clarke* a target."

"What do you want to do?" Balla asked.

"I want you to get the crew to the escape pods," Coloma said. "They're not firing at us now because they're still trying to figure out what just happened. That's not going to last long. Get everyone off the ship before it happens."

"And what are you going to do?" Balla asked.

"I'm going to go down with the ship," Coloma said. "And if I'm lucky, I'm going to take some of them with me."

VIII.

The first volley of missiles aimed at Earth Station, six in all, destroyed the elevator car and irreparably damaged the beanstalk cable itself. The second volley of missiles, five times the number of the first, violently

sheared Earth Station from the cable, severing the two just below their join.

The station and beanstalk were previously under the thrall of impressively high-order physics that kept them where they were supposed to be, at an altitude they should not have possibly been at, constructed in a manner that should not have sufficed. This physical legerdemain was powered literally by the earth itself, from a deep well of geothermal energy punched into the skin of the planet, which took extra effort to reach from Nairobi, situated more than a mile above sea level.

Without this nearly inexhaustible draw of power, the station reverted to life under conventional physics. This spelled doom for it, and for the beanstalk it fed on, a doom that was designed as minutely and purposefully as the station itself.

Its doom was designed to do two things. One, to protect the planet below (and, depending, space above) from falling chunks of a space station 1.8 kilometers in diameter, as well as several hundred kilometers of beanstalk. Two, to keep the secrets of the technology from falling into the hands of Earthlings. The two goals dovetailed into a single solution.

The beanstalk did not fall. It was designed not to fall. The energy formerly devoted to keeping it whole and structurally sound was rapidly and irrevocably committed to another task entirely: tearing it apart. Hundreds of kilometers above the surface of the planet, the strands of the beanstalk began to unwind at the molecular level, becoming minute particles of metallic dust. The waste heat generated expanded gases released by the process, puffing the dust into the upper reaches of the atmosphere. Air patterns and turbulence in the lower reaches of the atmosphere did the same task farther down. The people of Nairobi looked up to see the beanstalk smearing itself into the sky, pushed by prevailing winds like charcoals rubbed by a frenetic artist.

It would take six hours for the beanstalk to evaporate. Its particulate matter treated East Africa to gorgeous sunsets for a week

and the world to a year of temperatures one one-hundreth of a degree Celsius cooler than they would have been otherwise.

Earth Station, damaged and cut away from its power source, began the process of killing itself in an organized fashion before its rotational energy could do it chaotically. Resigned as it was to its own death, the station powered up its emergency energy sources, which would keep the now sealed-off segments of the station warm and breathable for approximately two hours, more than enough time to get the remaining people on the station to the escape pods, which now showed themselves by way of pathed lighting and an automated voice system, directing the trapped and desperate to them. On the outside of the station, panels blew off, exposing the hulls of the escape pods to space, making it easy for them to launch once they were filled.

Once all the escape pods were away, the station would dismantle itself, not by the beanstalk method, which required massive, directed energies the station no longer possessed or could harness, but by a simpler, less elegant solution: detonating itself through the use of shaped, high-energy explosives. Nothing larger than thirty cubic centimeters would remain, and what did remain would either burn up in the atmosphere or be tossed into space.

It was a good plan that did not take into account how an actively attacking force might affect an orderly self-destruction.

• • •

Because Hart Schmidt was one of the few people in his section of the station not screaming or crying, he was one of the first to hear the automated voice informing the people trapped there that escape pods were now available on the shuttle deck of every gate. He blinked, listened again to confirm he'd heard what he thought he had heard and then gave himself a moment to think, *Who the fuck tells people there are escape pods after they're already trapped and think they're going to die?* Then he picked himself up and headed to the door of gate seven.

Which was stuck, or appeared to be, at any rate; Schmidt's attempts to pull it open were like those of a child attempting to yank open a door held shut by a professional athlete. Schmidt cursed and kicked the door. After he was done dealing with the pain of kicking a door, a thought registered with him: The door was so cold, Schmidt could feel the heat sucking out of his shoe even with just a kick. He put his hand on the door proper, close to the jamb; it was like ice. It also seemed to suck at his fingertips.

Schmidt put his head close to the door, and over the din of people yelling and screaming, he heard another sound entirely: a high, urgent whisper of a whistle.

"Are you going to open that door?" someone asked Schmidt.

He turned, stepping away from the door, and rubbed his ear. He looked over.

It was Kruger and his three buddies.

"It's *you,*" Kruger said. His neck was purple.

"Hi," Schmidt said.

"Open that door," Kruger said. By now a small group of people, who had heard the automated message, anxiously stood behind Kruger.

"That's a really bad idea," Schmidt said.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Kruger said. "The station is blowing up around us, there are escape pods on the other side of that door and you're telling me it's a bad idea to open it?" He grabbed Schmidt before he could respond and tossed him out of the way, hurling him into a bench in the process. Then he grabbed the doorjamb and pulled. "Bastard's stuck," he said, after a second, and prepared to give it a mighty yank.

"There's a vacuum—," Schmidt began.

Kruger indeed yanked mightily, throwing the door open just enough that he might conceivably slide through, and was sucked through so quickly that when the door slammed shut on his hand, it left the tops of three of his fingers behind.

For the first time since the crisis began, there was dead silence at gate seven.

"What the *fuck* just happened?" bellowed Mothudi, breaking the silence.

"There's a vacuum on the other side of that door," Schmidt said, and then saw the blank expression on Mothudi's face. "There's no *air*. If you try to go in there, you won't be able to breathe. You'll die before you get down the ramp to the escape pods."

"Kruger's dead?" asked another of the soldiers, the one called Goosen.

Unless he carries his own oxygen supply, you bet, Schmidt thought, but did not say. What he said was, "Yes, Kruger is dead."

"The hell with this," said the third soldier, the one named Pandit. "I'm going to gate six." He bolted toward the gate at the end of the section, where people had queued to make their way to the escape pods. Mothudi and Goosen joined him a second later, followed by a yelling mass of humanity from gate seven who finally got it through their heads that there might not be enough spaces on the escape pods for all of them. A riot had begun.

Schmidt knew that for survival purposes he should be in the fray at gate six, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He decided he'd rather die as a fundamentally decent human being than live as the sort of asshole who'd tear out someone's liver to get into an escape pod.

The thought brought him inner peace, for about five seconds. Then the fact that he was going to die bubbled up again and scared him shitless. He leaned his head back against the bench Kruger had thrown him into and closed his eyes. Then he opened them again and looked forward. Into the back of the gate attendant's lectern. Which among other things had a large first-aid box slotted into it.

Schmidt looked over at Kruger's fingertips for a second, snerked and reached over to the box. He pulled it out and opened it up.

Inside, among many other things, were a foil blanket and a very small oxygen kit.

Hey, look, your very own oxygen supply, Schmidt's brain said to him.

"Yeah, well, don't get too excited," he said, out loud, to his brain. "You still can't get that door open without losing your hand."

Gate six exploded.

In the immediate aftermath, Schmidt wasn't sure if he'd been deafened by the pressure blast blowing out his eardrums or all the air in the section that contained gate six and gate seven being sucked out into space, along with Goosen, Pandit and Mothudi and everyone else who had been raging at gate six. Then he felt the air in his lungs seeping out through his lips and nose and decided it just didn't matter. He grabbed at the first-aid box, wrapped the blanket over the top half of his body as tightly as he could with one hand and with the other covered his face and mouth with the mask of the oxygen kit.

The mask immediately fogged. Schmidt gave himself a quick hit of oxygen and tried not to panic.

In another minute, the section was completely silent and Schmidt felt himself start to freeze. He got up from the bench he'd crouched under and went to the gate seven door. It opened with only the slightest resistance.

On the other side of the door was Kruger: cyanotic, fingerless, frozen and looking, in death, extraordinarily pissed. Schmidt sidestepped Kruger's corpsicle and ran as quickly as he could down the ramp, blue fingers clutching the space blanket and the oxygen.

The shuttle deck of gate seven had sprouted what looked like several doors leading to subterranean alcoves: the escape pods. Schmidt picked the closest one and with shivering hands cycled the portal shut. Sealed, the escape pod sensed the vacuum and freezing cold and blasted both oxygen and warmth into the pod. Schmidt cried and shook.

"Pod launch in fifteen seconds," a computerized voice said. "Secure yourself, please."

Schmidt, still shivering violently, reached up and pulled down the padded seat restraint as the escape pod counted off the seconds. He

passed out before the voice got to three and missed his launch entirely.

• • •

Lowen cried with relief when the automated announcement about the escape pods fired up and then started going for one of them when their egress doors on the deck floor opened. Wilson reached out and held her back.

"What are you doing?" she yelled at him, clawing at his hand.

"We have a way off this station," Wilson said to her. "Other people don't."

Lowen pointed to the escape pods opening up around her. "I'd rather go this way," she said. "I'd rather have something around me when I launch myself into space."

"Dani," Wilson said, "it's going to be okay. Trust me."

Lowen stopped going for the escape pods but didn't look the least bit happy about it.

"When they start launching these things, they're probably going to cycle out the air," Wilson said. "Let's go ahead and cover up." He attached his oxygen apparatus and then covered his head with his cowl.

"How do you see?" Lowen asked, looking at the blankness of the cowl.

"The suit nanobots are photosensitive and send a feed to my BrainPal, which allows me to see," Wilson said. He reached over to help her with her oxygen and to seal her cowl.

"Great," Lowen said. "How am I going to see?"

Wilson stopped. "Uh," he said.

"'Uh'?" Lowen said. "Are you *kidding* me, Harry?"

"Here," Wilson said, and sent instructions from his BrainPal to Lowen's suit. It sealed up everywhere but the eyes. "That should be fine until we go," he said.

"When is that?" Lowen asked.

"I was going to do an emergency purge of the deck," Wilson said. "But now I'll wait for the pods to go before we do."

"And then I'll be blind," Lowen said.

"Sorry," Wilson said.

"Just talk to me on the way down, all right?" Lowen said.

"Uh," Wilson said.

"'Uh,' again?" Lowen said.

"No, wait," Wilson said. "You have your PDA, right?"

"I put it in my underwear, since you insisted I take off my clothes," Lowen said.

"Put the audio up as loud as you can. Then I should be able to talk to you," Wilson said.

From above the shuttle deck, the two of them heard panicked yelling and screaming, and the thundering of people running down the ramp to the shuttle deck.

"Oh my God, Harry," Lowen said, pointing at the rush. "Look at that."

Harry turned in time to see a flash, a hole in the hull where the bottom of the ramp used to be, and people both thrown into the air and sucked out of the hole. Lowen screamed and turned, losing her footing and falling hard against the deck, momentarily stunning her. The suction of the hole sent her tumbling silently into space.

Harry frantically sent a command to her suit to cover her eyes and then leaped into space after her.

IX.

Captain Coloma had been keeping tabs on Schmidt and Wilson, the *Clarke*'s lost sheep, via their PDA and BrainPal, respectively. Wilson had been moving about shuttle gate five but seemed fine; Schmidt was at gate seven, having just missed the shuttle, and was largely motionless until the announcement about the escape pods. Then the ships attacking Earth Station started putting missiles into the shuttle gates, intentionally targeting the decks where the people were funneling into escape pods.

"You sons of bitches," Coloma said.

She was alone on the *Clarke*. The escape pods off the ship seemed not to attract attention. At the very least, no missiles were sent in their direction. Not every crew member was happy to go; she'd had to threaten Neva Balla with a charge of insubordination to get her into a pod. Coloma smiled grimly at this memory. Balla was going to make an excellent captain.

The ships targeted and hit the sections Wilson and Schmidt were in. Coloma zoomed in and saw the wreckage and the bodies vomiting out of the holes in the Earth Station hull. Remarkably, Coloma's tracking data told her both Wilson and Schmidt were alive and moving. "Come on, guys," Coloma said.

Wilson's data indicated he had been sucked out of gate five. Coloma grimaced at this but then watched his BrainPal data further. He was alive and just fine, aside from hyperventilating slightly. Coloma wondered how he was managing this trick until she remembered that he was scheduled to do a jump with a U.S. soldier later today. It looked as though he were doing it earlier than he expected. Coloma watched his data for a few seconds more to assure herself that he was good, then turned her attention to Schmidt.

Her data on Schmidt was less exact because his PDA did not track his vital statistics, unlike a BrainPal. All Coloma could tell was that Schmidt was on the move. He had gotten himself down the ramp of gate seven, which the *Clarke*'s shuttle pilot had damaged, meaning it was filled with vacuum. Despite that, Schmidt had planted himself in an escape pod. Coloma was curious how he'd managed that and regretted that at this point it would be unlikely that she would ever find out.

The escape pod launched, plunging down toward the atmosphere.

The *Erie Morningstar* launched a missile directly toward it.

Coloma smiled. She went to her display, tracked the missile and vaporized it with the final blast of her antiparticle beam. "No one shoots down *my* people, you asshole," she said.

And finally, Coloma and the *Clarke* had the attention of the interloping ships. The *Erie Morningstar* launched two missiles in her direction. Coloma waited until they were almost on top of her before deploying countermeasures. The missiles detonated beautifully, away from the *Clarke,* which was now swinging itself around as Coloma plugged in a course for the *Erie Morningstar*.

The *Erie Morningstar* responded with two more missiles; Coloma once more waited until the last minute before countermeasures. This time she was not as lucky. The starboard missile tore into the skin of the *Clarke,* rupturing forward compartments. If anyone had been there, they would be dead. Coloma grinned fiercely.

In the distance, three ships fired on the *Clarke,* two missiles each. Coloma looked at her display to gauge how long it would be until impact. She grimaced at the numbers and pushed the *Clarke*'s engines to full.

The *Erie Morningstar* was now clearly aware of what the *Clarke* was up to and was attempting evasive maneuvers. Coloma compensated and recalculated and was pleased with her results. There was no way the *Erie Morningstar* wasn't going to get kissed by the *Clarke*.

The first of the new set of missiles plowed into the *Clarke,* followed by the second and then the third and fourth in rapid succession. The *Clarke* went dark. It didn't matter; the *Clarke* had inertia on its side.

The *Clarke* crumpled into the *Erie Morningstar* as the fifth and sixth missiles struck, shattering both ships.

Coloma smiled. Her Colonial Defense Forces orders were, should she engage a hostile ship that attacked either her or Earth Station, to disable the ship if she could and destroy it only if necessary. They wanted whoever was in the ship, in order to find out who was behind everything the Colonial Union was coming up against.

That ship is definitely disabled, Coloma thought. *Is it destroyed? If it is, it had it coming. It went after my people*.

Sitting there in the dark, Coloma reached over and patted the *Clarke* fondly.

"You're a good ship," she said. "I'm glad you were mine."

A seventh missile tore into the bridge.

• • •

Wilson couldn't see Lowen but could track her. His BrainPal vision showed her as a tumbling sprite twenty klicks to the east. Well, fair enough. He was tumbling, too, because of his hasty exit from Earth Station; his BrainPal gave him an artificially stabilized view of things. Wilson was less concerned about her tumbling and more concerned about her utter silence. Even screaming would be better because it would mean she was conscious and alive. But there was nothing from her.

Wilson pushed it from his mind as best he could. There was nothing he could do about it right now. Once they were in the atmosphere, he could maneuver himself over to her and see how she was doing. For now, all he needed to do was get her through the burning part of reentry.

Instead of thinking about Lowen, Wilson had his BrainPal turn its visual attention to Earth Station, which floated darkly above him, save for the occasional flare as the missiles struck another area of the station. Wilson did a status check of the Colonial Union diplomatic ships at Earth Station. The *Aberforth,* the *Zhou* and the *Schulz* were all pulling away from Earth Station at speed, with or without their diplomatic contingents. Their captains were probably aware by now that one way or another, Earth Station was going up like a Roman candle.

The *Clarke* was missing or not responding. That was not good at all. If it wasn't there, then it wouldn't matter whether the shuttle got everyone out or not; they would have met their fate on the ship. Wilson tried not to think about that.

He especially tried not to think about Hart.

There was a dazzling light from Earth Station. Wilson focused his attention on it once more.

It was detonating. Not haphazardly, as in the attack; no, this was a planned and focused thing, a series of brilliant flashes designed to reduce an entire spaceship into chunks no larger than one's own hand. Whatever the attacking ships started, the Colonial Union's detonation protocols were finishing now.

A thought flashed into Wilson's head: *Some of that debris is headed this direction and it's going much faster than you are.*

A second thought flashed into Wilson's head: *Well, fuck.*

Wilson's BrainPal alerted him that Lowen was beginning to drag on the Earth's atmosphere. A second later, it told him he was beginning to do the same thing. Wilson ordered the release of the nanobots and immediately found himself encased in a matte black sphere. On the other side of that, he knew, would be several thousand degrees of reentry friction that the nanobots were shielding him from, taking some of the heat from the reentry to strengthen the shield as he fell.

This would not be a good time for Dani to wake up, Wilson thought, thinking about the flat darkness surrounding him. Then he remembered that she would be in darkness anyway because she had no BrainPal.

I'm definitely not a fun first date, Wilson thought.

He fell and fell some more and tried not to think of Lowen, or Hart, or the *Clarke,* or the fact that screaming chunks of Earth Station were almost certainly whizzing past him at ultrasonic speeds and could turn him into kibble if they smacked into him.

This did not leave a whole lot to think about.

There was a sudden fluttering sound and the nanobots tore away. Wilson blinked in the noontime sun. He was amazed to remember that it was still barely after noon, Nairobi time; everything that had happened happened in just about an hour.

Wilson did not think he could take many more hours like this.

Lowen pinged on his consciousness. She was now less than five klicks away and a klick up, still tumbling but less so in the atmosphere. Wilson carefully negotiated his way over to her, stabilized her and, as

much as he could, checked her vitals. At the very least, she was still breathing. It was something.

Still, not having her conscious was not going to be a good thing when it came to landing.

Wilson thought about it for a moment, but only for a moment, because the ground was going to become a problem in the very near future. Then he checked how many nanobots he had left, estimated how much weight they were going to hold and then wrapped himself around Lowen, face-to-face. They were going to go in tandem.

That covered, Wilson finally looked around to see where he was. In the close distance the beanstalk still stood, feathering in the wind. Wilson had no idea what that was about, but it meant that he remained somewhere near Nairobi. He looked down, compared the terrain with what he had stored in his BrainPal and realized he could make it to the football field he and Hirsch were originally planning to land at.

Lowen woke up at around three thousand meters and began screaming and thrashing. Wilson spoke directly into her ear. "I'm here," he said. "Don't panic."

"Where are we?" Lowen asked.

"Ten thousand feet above Kenya," Wilson said.

"Oh, God," Lowen said.

"I have you," Wilson said. "We're in tandem."

"How did you manage that?" Lowen asked, calming down.

"It seemed a better idea than you falling alone while unconscious," Wilson said.

"Point," Lowen said, after a second.

"I'm about five seconds from deploying the chute," Wilson said. "Are you ready?"

Lowen tightened up around Wilson. "Let's never do this again," she said.

"Promise," he said. "Here we go." He deployed 'bots from both of their packs so that both of them were tethered into the chute. There was a sharp jerk, and then the two of them were floating.

"We're close enough to the ground and going slow enough that you could use your eyes if you wanted," Wilson said, after a few moments. Lowen nodded. Wilson had her cowl open up.

Lowen looked down and then jerked her head back up, eyes closed. "Okay, that was a spectacularly bad idea," she said.

"We'll be down in just a minute," Wilson promised.

"And this parachute for two won't mess us up?" Lowen asked.

"No," Wilson said. "It's smarter than a real parachute."

"Don't say this is not a real parachute, please," Lowen said.

"It's smarter than other parachutes," Wilson corrected. "It's been compensating for wind and other factors since we opened it up."

"Great," Lowen said. "Just tell me when we're down."

They were down a minute and a half later, the nanobots dissipating into the wind as their feet touched down. Lowen disengaged from Wilson, grabbed her head, turned to the side and threw up.

"Sorry," Wilson said.

"It's not you, I swear," Lowen said, spitting to clear her mouth. "It's *everything*."

"I understand," Wilson said. "I'm sorry about that, too."

He looked up in the sky and watched bits of Earth Station fall like glitter.

X.

"I told you it was a bad idea," Rigney said, to Egan.

"Your continued lack of enthusiasm is noted," Egan replied. "Not that it does us any good at this point."

The two of them sat on a bench at Avery Park, a small neighborhood park in an outer borough of Phoenix City, feeding ducks.

"This is nice," Rigney said, tossing bread to the ducks.

"Yes," Egan said.

"Peaceful," Rigney said.

"It is," Egan said, tossing her own bread at the quacking birds.

"If I had to do this more than once a year, I might stab something," Rigney said.

"There is that," Egan said. "But you said you wanted to catch up. I assumed you meant actually catch up, not just talk sports scores. And right now is not the time to be catching up on anything in Phoenix Station itself."

"I knew that much already," Rigney said.

"So what do you want to know?" Egan asked.

"I want to know how bad it is," Rigney said. "From your end, I mean. I know how bad it is on my end."

"How bad is it on your end?" Egan asked.

"Full-bore panic," Rigney said. "I could go into details, but you might run screaming. You?"

Egan was quiet for a moment while she tossed more bread at the birds. "Do you remember when you came to my presentation for those midlevel bureaucrats and you heard me tell them that the Colonial Union is thirty years out from total collapse?" she said.

"Yes, I do," Rigney said.

"Well, we were wrong about that," Egan said. "It's closer to twenty."

"That can't all be because of what happened at Earth Station," Rigney said.

"Why couldn't it?" Egan said. "They think *we* did it, Abel. They think we lured several hundred of their best diplomatic and political minds into a shooting gallery and then had a fake group of terrorists blow the place apart. They didn't shoot to destroy the space station outright. They went after the elevator car and they waited until people went for the escape pods to put holes in the shuttle bays. They went for the Earthlings."

"They also shot at the *Clarke* and its shuttle," Rigney pointed out.

"The shuttle got away," Egan pointed out. "As did the single escape pod to make it off Earth Station. As for the *Clarke,* how hard is it to

make the argument that it was a decoy to throw the scent off their trail, especially since everyone but their captain survived? And especially since fourteen of the ships that attacked Earth Station seem to have disappeared back into the same black hole from which they came. Seems a fine conspiracy."

"That's a little much," Rigney said.

"It would be if we were dealing with rational events," Egan said. "But look at it from the Earth's point of view. Now they have no serious egress into space, their political castes are decimated and paranoid, and they're reminded that at this moment, their fate is not their own. The easiest, best scapegoat they have is us. They will never forget this. They will never forgive it. And no matter what evidence comes to light about it, exonerating *us,* they will simply never believe it."

"So Earth is off the table," Rigney said.

"It's so far off the table the table is underneath the curve of the planet," Egan said. "We've lost the Earth. For real this time. Now the only thing we can hope for is that it stays neutral and unaffiliated. That might mean that seventy years down the road we might have a shot at them again. If they join the Conclave, it's all over."

"And what does State think the chances of that are?" Rigney said. "Of them joining the Conclave?"

"At this moment? Better than them coming back to us," Egan said.

"The consensus at CDF is that the Conclave is behind all of this, you know," Rigney said. "Everything since Danavar. They have the means to plant spies in the CDF and in the Department of State. They have the resources to pluck our ships out of the sky, turn them back into warships and drop them next to Earth Station. All sixteen of the ships that disappeared showed up there. And there's something else we haven't told State yet."

"What is that?" Egan said.

"The ship Captain Coloma smashed the *Clarke* into. The *Erie Morningstar.* It had no crew. It was run by a brain in a box."

"Like the one in the *Urse Damay,*" Egan said. "Of course, the Conclave maintains the *Urse Damay* was taken from them as well. Along with several other ships."

"Our intelligence hasn't confirmed those stories," Rigney said. "They could be running that across the trail to keep us confused."

"Then there's the matter of someone out there actively sabotaging our relationship with Earth," Egan said. "And the fact there's a growing segment of the colony population who wants to replace the Colonial Union with an entirely new union with the Earth at the center. That certainly seemed to spring up overnight."

"Another thing the Conclave has resources for," Rigney pointed out.

"Perhaps," Egan said. "Or perhaps there's a third party who is playing us, Earth and the Conclave for fools for purposes we haven't figured out yet."

Rigney shook his head. "The simplest explanation is usually the correct one," he said.

"I agree," Egan said. "Where I disagree is whether making the Conclave the bad guy is the simplest explanation. I think it's clear that someone wants the Colonial Union dead and destroyed, and Earth is the lever to do that. I also think it's possible the same someone has been poking at the Conclave, trying to find the lever that destroys them, too. We almost found one, once."

"I don't think the CDF is comfortable with that level of shadowy conspiracy, Liz," Rigney said. "They prefer something they can hit with a stick."

"Find it first, Abel," Egan said. "Then you can hit it all you like."

The two sat there, silent, chucking bread at ducks.

"At least you've gotten one thing right," Egan said.

"What's that," Rigney said.

"Your fire team," Egan said. "Ambassador Abumwe and her people. We keep setting her up with impossible missions and she always

gets something out of them. Sometimes not the things we want. But always something."

"She blew the Bula negotiations," Rigney said.

"*We* blew the Bula negotiations," Egan reminded him. "We told her to lie, and she did exactly what we told her to do, and we were caught red-handed when she did it."

"Fair enough," Rigney said. "What are you going to do with Abumwe now?"

"You mean, now that she and her team are the only group to survive the Earth Station attack intact, and her captain has become a posthumous hero both for saving her entire diplomatic team and for taking down two of the attacking ships, *and* the sole bright spot for the Colonial Union in this whole sorry mess was Lieutenant Wilson saving the daughter of the United States secretary of state by leaping off an exploding space station with her in tow?" Egan said.

"Yes, that," Rigney said.

"We start with a promotion, I think," Egan said. "She and her people are no longer the B-team, and we don't have any more time to waste. Things are never going back to what they were, Abel. We need to build the future as fast as we can. Before it collapses in on us. Abumwe's going to help get us there. Her and her team. All of them. All of them that are left, anyway."

• • •

Wilson and Lowen stood on the grounds of what remained of the Nairobi beanstalk and Earth Station, waiting for his ride, the shuttle that was slowly coming in for a landing.

"So, what's it like?" Lowen wanted to know.

"What's what like?" Wilson asked.

"Leaving Earth a second time," Lowen said.

"It's the same in a lot of ways," Wilson said. "I'm excited to go, to see what's out there in the universe. But I also know it's not likely that

I'm ever coming back. And once again, I'm leaving behind people I care about."

Lowen smiled at that and gave Wilson a peck on the cheek. "You don't have to leave," she said. "You can always defect."

"Tempting," he said. "But as much as I love the Earth, I have to admit something."

"And what's that," Lowen said.

"I'm just not from around here anymore," Wilson said

The shuttle landed.

"Well," Lowen said, "if you ever change your mind, you know where we are."

"I do," Wilson said. "You know where I am, too. Come up and see me."

"That's going to be a little more difficult now, all things considered," Lowen said.

"I know," Wilson said. "The offer still stands."

"One day I'll take you up on that," Lowen said.

"Good," Wilson said. "Life's always interesting with you around."

The shuttle door opened. Wilson picked up his bag to go.

"Hey, Harry," Lowen said.

"Yes?" Wilson said.

"Thanks for saving my life," she said.

Wilson smiled and waved good-bye.

Hart Schmidt and Ambassador Ode Abumwe were waiting inside.

Wilson smiled and shook the ambassador's hand warmly. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you again, ma'am," he said to her.

Abumwe smiled equally warmly. "Likewise, Lieutenant."

Wilson turned to Schmidt. "As for you," he said. "Don't you do that again. That whole almost dying thing."

"I promise nothing," Schmidt said.

Wilson hugged his friend, then sat down and buckled in.

"Did you have a good time back on Earth?" Schmidt asked.

"I did," Wilson said. "Now let's go home."

Abumwe nodded to the shuttle pilot. They put the Earth below them and headed into the sky above.

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Extra

Hafte Sorvalh Eats a Churro and Speaks to the Youth of Today

Hafte Sorvalh, alien, walked the Mall in Washington, D.C. toward Antonio Morales, proprietor of Tony's Churros, a small stand parked not too far from the Lincoln Monument. She had completed her morning meetings, had a couple of hours before her afternoon engagements, and had a craving, as she usually did when she was in D.C. for hot Mexican pastries.

Tony had her standard order of a half dozen cinnamon churros ready by the time she approached the stand. He handed them to her in a bag, smiling. "You knew I was coming," Sorvalh said to Tony, as she took the bag.

"You are ten feet tall, Señora," Tony said, using the Spanish honorific because he knew it charmed Sorvalh when he did; Morales had lived in the D.C. area his entire life and struggled through Spanish in high school. "It's hard not to know you are coming."

"I suppose that's true," Sorvalh said, paying for her pastries. "And how are you, Tony?"

"Business is good," Tony said. "But then business is always good. People like churros. Are you happy? Have a churro. Depressed? Have a churro. About to go to prison for embezzlement? Have a churro before you go. Just got out of prison? Churro time."

"Truly, the miracle food," Sorvalh said.

"You come to get them every time you're in town," Tony said. "Tell me that I'm wrong."

"You're not wrong," Sorvalh said. "Although a sentient being cannot live on churros alone."

"Don't be too sure," Tony said. "In Uruguay, they make churros filled with cheese. That's lunch right there. I may experiment with that. You can be my test subject the next time you come round."

"I think I'll pass," Sorvalh said. "I like what I like. I am a creature of habit."

"Your loss," Tony said. "And how have you been, Señora? How is the diplomatic whirl?"

Sorvalh did her version of a grimace at this. Things had not been going well at all; since the destruction of Earth Station, things had been a real mess. Although the Conclave, which she represented, had nothing to do with its destruction, the loss of the station had put the entire planet into paranoid, angry mode at anyone who was not in fact a human from Earth. Consequently, her meetings with human diplomats and officials in Beijing, Moscow, Paris and the Hague were less like discussions and more like therapy sessions, in which her human counterparts vented as she sat there, cramped in their tiny offices (when one is nearly ten feet tall, all human offices are tiny), practicing what she hoped the humans involved would interpret as a sympathetic expression.

"It could be better," Sorvalh admitted.

"That bad," Tony said. He was getting used to reading Sorvalh's physiology, and correctly guessed that there were many things Sorvalh was choosing not to say at the moment.

"It's a complicated world we live in, Tony," Sorvalh said.

"It's a complicated world *you* live in," Tony said. "I make churros."

"And that's not complicated?" Sorvalh asked. "In its own way?"

Tony shrugged. "You know, this is actually my second job," he said. "I went to school in business, got an MBA and spent ten years being one of those finance pricks who make everyone else miserable. I had a

lot of fun at first and then near the end there I felt every day like I either needed to get drunk or start a fight with someone. So I uncomplicated my life. And here I am, with a churro stand. And now I'm happy most of the time. Because no one's unhappy to see the churro man."

"You'll never get rich being the churro man," Sorvalh said.

Tony smiled and opened his arms wide. "I was a finance prick! I'm already rich! And anyway, as I said, business is good. In fact, here come some new customers." Tony pointed down the Mall, where a gaggle of eight-year-olds, herded by a pair of harried-looking adults, were heading chaotically churro-ward.

Sorvalh followed Tony's pointed finger to look at the children. "Hopefully not all theirs," she said.

"I would guess not," Tony said. "More like a school outing to see the monuments."

"Should I step back?" Sorvalh asked. Not every human was comfortable around ten-foot aliens. She didn't want to get in the way of Tony's business.

"You might," Tony said. "If they were all adults I'd tell them to get a grip, but these are kids and you never know how they're going to react."

Sorvalh nodded and walked a bit away, toward a bench near the stand. Her body shape and height wouldn't have made it comfortable for her to sit on, but for some reason it was less awkward for her to unfold and sit on the ground near a bench—a designated sitting area—than it was anywhere else. Sorvalh was sure if she thought about it enough, she could figure out where she had picked up this particular quirk of hers, but the fact of the matter was she was much less interested in that than she was in her now-cooling churros. She started applying herself to them while Tony's stand was overrun with screaming, tiny humans, excited to cram fried dough into their gullets. She looked the other direction for most of that.

After a few minutes of quiet contemplation of her churros, Sorvalh turned to see one of the human children not too far from her, staring up at her solemnly. Sorvalh stopped chewing her churro, swallowed, and addressed the child directly. "Hello," she said.

The child looked behind her, as if expecting that Sorvalh was speaking to someone else, then turned back to her when it was clear she wasn't. "Hello," the girl said.

"Enjoying your churro?" Sorvalh asked, pointing to the churro in the girl's hand. The girl nodded, silently. "Good," Sorvalh said, and moved to go back to her own.

"Are you a monster?" the little girl asked, suddenly.

Sorvalh cocked her head and considered the question. "I don't think I am," Sorvalh said. "But maybe that depends on what you think a monster is."

"A monster fights and wrecks things," the little girl said.

"Well, I try to avoid doing that," Sorvalh said. "So maybe I'm not a monster after all."

"But you *look* like a monster," the girl said.

"On Earth I might look like a monster," Sorvalh said. "Back home on my planet I look quite normal, I promise you. Maybe a little taller than most, but otherwise just like anyone else. On my planet, you would be the one who looks strange. What do you think about that?"

"What's a planet?" the girl asked.

"Oh, dear," Sorvalh said. "What are they teaching you in your school?"

"Today we learned about Abraham Lincoln," the girl said. "He was tall, too."

"Yes he was," Sorvalh said. "Do you know what the Earth is?"

The girl nodded. "It's where we are."

"Right," Sorvalh said. "It's a planet. A big round place where your people live. My people have a place like it, too. But instead of calling it Earth, we call it Lalah."

"Hannah!" One of the adult humans had figured out that the girl had wandered away from her group and was talking to the big, scary-looking alien sitting by the bench. The human adult—a woman—came running up to retrieve her charge. "I'm sorry," the woman said to Sorvalh. "We don't mean to bother you."

"She's not bothering me at all," Sorvalh said, pleasantly. "In fact, we were reviewing basic astronomy facts, like how the Earth is a planet."

"Hannah, you should have known that," the woman said. "We learned that earlier in the year." Hannah shrugged. The woman looked over at Sorvalh. "We really did cover the solar system earlier this year. It's in the curriculum."

"I believe you," Sorvalh said.

"It says it's from a planet called LAH LAH," Hannah said, overenunciating the name, and looking up at her teacher. "It's in the solar system, too."

"Well, it's in *a* solar system," Sorvalh said. "And I'm a woman, just like you are."

"You don't look like a woman," Hannah said.

"I look like a woman where I come from," Sorvalh said. "We look different, is all."

"You're very good with children," the woman said, noting Sorvalh's responses and tone.

"I spend my days dealing with human diplomats," Sorvalh said. "Children and diplomats can be remarkably similar."

"Would you mind?" the woman said, gesturing to her main gaggle of children. "I know some of the other kids would love to meet an alien—is it all right to call you an alien?"

"It's what I am," Sorvalh said. "From your point of view."

"I just never know if it's a slur or something," the woman said.

"It's not, or at least I don't think it is," Sorvalh said. "And yes, you may bring the other children over if you like. I'm happy to be an educational experience for them."

"Oh, okay, great," the woman said, and then grabbed Hannah by the shoulders. "You stay here, honey. I'll be back." She rushed off to get the other children.

"She seems nice," Sorvalh said to Hannah.

"That's Mrs. Everston," Hannah said. "Her perfume makes me sneeze."

"Does it," Sorvalh said.

"It makes her smell like my grandmother," Hannah said.

"And do you like how your grandmother smells?" Sorvalh asked.

"Not really," Hannah admitted.

"Well," Sorvalh said. "I promise not to tell either your grandmother or Mrs. Everston."

"Thank you," said Hannah, gravely.

Presently Sorvalh found herself surrounded by a gaggle of small children, who looked up at her expectantly. Sorvalh glanced over at Mrs. Everston, who also looked at her expectantly. Apparently it was all on Sorvalh now. She suppressed an inner sigh and then smiled at the children.

Some of them gasped.

"That was a smile," Sorvalh said, quickly.

"I don't think so," said one of the children.

"I promise you it was," Sorvalh said. "Hello, children. I am Hafte Sorvalh. Have any of you ever spoken to an alien before?" There were head shakes all around, signifying "no." "Well, then, here's your chance," Sorvalh said. "Ask me anything you want to know."

"What are you?" asked one of the children, a boy.

"I am a Lalan," Sorvalh said. "From a planet called Lalah."

"No, I mean are you like a lizard or an amphibian?" the boy asked.

"I suppose that to you I might look a little like a reptile," Sorvalh said. "But I'm not really like one at all. I am more like you than I am like a lizard, but I admit I'm mostly not like either. It's better to think of me as my own thing: a Lalan."

"Do you eat people?" asked another boy.

“I eat churros,” Sorvalh said, holding up her now-neglected treat. “So unless churros are made of people, no.”

“You can’t eat churros all the time,” this new boy pointed out.

“Actually, if I wanted to I could,” Sorvalh said, taking the opposite position of her earlier comment to Tony. “It’s one of the perks of being a grown-up.”

The children seemed to pause to consider this.

“However, I don’t,” Sorvalh said. “When I am on Earth, I usually eat your fruits and vegetables. I particularly like sweet potatoes and tangerines. I only rarely eat your meats. They disagree with me. And I don’t eat people, because I wouldn’t want people to eat me.”

“Are you married?” asked another child.

“My people don’t get married,” Sorvalh said.

“Are you living in sin?” asked the same child. “Like the way my mother says my Aunt Linda is?”

“I don’t know about your mother or your Aunt Linda,” Sorvalh said. “And I’m not sure what ‘living in sin’ means here. My people don’t marry because that’s just not how we do things. The best way to describe it is that we have lots of friends and sometimes as friends we have children together.”

“Like my Aunt Linda,” the child said.

“Perhaps,” Sorvalh said, diplomatically as possible.

“Are you pregnant now?” asked another child.

“I’m too old for that now,” Sorvalh said. “And we don’t get pregnant anyway. We lay eggs.”

“You’re a chicken!” said the first boy, and there was laughter to this.

“Probably not a chicken,” Sorvalh said. “But yes, like your birds we lay eggs. We tend to do this all at the same time, and then the community cares for them all at once.”

“How many eggs have you laid?” asked the latest child.

“It’s a difficult question to answer,” Sorvalh said, guessing that Mrs. Everston probably wouldn’t want her to go into great detail about

Lalan reproductive matters; humans were known to be twitchy about such things. "It's probably best to say that I had four children who lived to adulthood, and two of them now have had children of their own."

"How do you speak our language?" asked a girl, close to Sorvalh.

"I practice it," Sorvalh said. "Just like anyone does. I'm good with languages, though, and I study yours every night. And when I go to other countries, I use this." She held up her PDA. "It translates for me so I can speak to other humans and they to me."

"Do you play basketball?" asked another child.

"I don't think it would be much of a challenge for someone of my height," Sorvalh said.

"How do you get into rooms?" asked a different child.

"Very carefully," Sorvalh said.

"Have you met the president?" asked a different little girl.

"Yes, once," Sorvalh said, recalling the event. "I liked visiting the president because I can stand up easily in the Oval Office. It has high ceilings."

"Do you poop?" asked a boy.

"Brian *Winters*," Mrs. Everston said, severely.

"It's a valid question!" the boy said, protesting. He was apparently the sort of eight-year-old boy for whom it made sense to have the phrase "it's a valid question" in his repertoire. Mrs. Everston said something else to Brian while Sorvalh quickly looked up the definition of "poop" on her PDA.

"I apologize for that," Mrs. Everston said.

"Not at all," Sorvalh said, smoothly. "It's not the worst question I've ever been asked. And to answer your question, Brian, no, I don't *poop*. At least not like you do. I do excrete waste from time to time, and when I do, it's otherwise very much like going to the bathroom is for you. Next question."

"Do you know any other aliens?" asked another girl.

"Whole planets' worth," Sorvalh said. "I have personally met people from four hundred different races of intelligent beings. Some of them are as small as that," she pointed to a squirrel running frantically toward a tree, "and some of them are so large that they make me look tiny."

"Do *they* poop?"

"Brian *Winters*," Sorvalh said, severely. "That is *not* a valid question." Brian Winters, unused to being reprimanded by a ten-foot alien, shut up.

"Will more aliens come here?" asked a boy.

"I don't know," Sorvalh said. "More have been coming recently, because my government, which is known as the Conclave, has been talking to the governments here on Earth. But I think a lot will have to happen before they are so common that you don't notice them anymore when you walk down the Mall."

"Are we going to have a war?" asked Hannah.

Sorvalh turned her head to look at Hannah directly. "Why do you ask, Hannah?" she said, after a minute.

"My dad said to my mom that he thinks there's going to be a war," Hannah said. "He said that it's going to be the humans against everyone else and that everyone else wants a war to get rid of all of us. You'll fight us and then when we're gone you'll live where we live and no one will know we were here."

" 'A monster fights and wrecks things,' " Sorvalh said. She looked out at the children and saw them quiet, waiting for her answer, the two adults standing silently as well, patient.

"I can't say there will never be a war," she said. "We can't make promises like that. What I can say is that I am a diplomat. What I do is talk to people so we don't have to fight them. That's why I'm here. To talk and to listen and to find a way all of us can live together so that we don't fight, and we're not scared of each other." She reached out and gently touched Hannah on the cheek. "It's my job to make sure that

none of us has to see the other as a monster. Do you understand what I mean, Hannah?"

Hannah nodded.

"Good," Sorvalh said. "Then you can tell your dad, from me, that I don't want a war either."

"Okay," Hannah said.

"All right, kids," Mrs. Everston said, clapping her hands together. "Time to say good-bye to Mrs. Sorvalh now. We still have to walk to the Washington Monument."

"Get a picture!" one of the kids said. "No one will believe us if you don't."

Mrs. Everston looked over. "Is it okay? I know we've imposed a lot on you today."

"No you haven't," Sorvalh said. "And yes, it is."

Five minutes later the pictures were done, the children were organized as much as a passel of eight-year-olds could be, and the entire crew was headed toward the Washington Monument. Sorvalh watched them go. As they walked, Hannah turned to look at Sorvalh. Sorvalh waved. Hannah smiled and turned back to her group. Sorvalh looked at the cold remains of her churros, tossed them into a nearby trash can, and went to get fresh pastries.

Tony was waiting for her with a bag of churros already gathered up.

"You are good," Sorvalh said, taking the new churros. She reached for her money pouch.

Tony waved her off. "On the house," he said. "You earned it today, Señora."

"Thank you, Tony," Sorvalh said, and pulled one out of the bag. "I think I did at that." She smiled at her friend and then took a bite.

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THE END
OF ALL THINGS

John Scalzi

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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To Jay and Mary Vernau, of Jay and Mary's Book Center of Troy, Ohio;

To Alan Beatts and Jude Feldman of Borderlands Books of San Francisco, California;

To Duane Wilkins and Olivia Ahl of University Bookstore, University of Washington;

And to all the booksellers who have shared my work with the readers in their stores.

You are the best. This one is for you, with thanks.

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THE LIFE OF THE MIND

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To my friend John Anderson, dearly departed, and to all who were friends with him. Let the music play.

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PART ONE

So, I'm supposed to tell you how I became a brain in a box.

Huh. Well, that starts off a little *dark,* doesn't it.

Also, I don't really know, technically, how they did it to me. It's not like once I woke up as a disembodied brain they showed me an informational video about how they did it, just in case I was curious. *Here's the part where we snipped off all the blood vessels and peripheral nerves,* the video would say. *Here's how we removed the skull and spinal column, and here's how we stuffed your brain full of nifty little sensors to track your thoughts. Pay attention, there's a test later.*

Jesus, I'm really bad at this.

I'm not a writer or an orator. I'm not a storyteller. I'm a spaceship pilot, so let me just get that right out there. The Colonial Union asked me to tell what happened to me because they think that information will be useful to them. Fine, I'll do it, happy to help. But it's not going to be, you know, classic literature. It's going to skip around. I'm going to get lost telling the story and come back to points and then get lost again. I'm doing this off the top of my head.

Well, metaphorically. I don't have a head anymore. Pretty sure they tossed my head into an incinerator or something.

See what I mean?

Someone's going to have to edit this if it's going to make any sense at all. So to you poor anonymous Colonial Union editor: I salute you and I apologize to you. I'm not trying to make your life difficult, I swear. I just don't know what they really want, or how they want me to do it.

Just tell us everything, I was told. Get it all down. Don't worry. We'll sort it out. Which I guess is where you come in, anonymous editor. Happy sorting.

And if you're reading this: I'm sure the editor did an excellent job.

Where to start this damn thing? I don't think any of you will give a crap about my childhood; it was standard-issue pretty happy, mostly noneventful, with decent parents and friends. Schooling likewise unremarkable with all the usual bits of stupidity and libidinousness with occasional moments of cramming for tests. Honestly, no one will want to hear about any of that. I hardly do and I lived it.

So, I think I'll start at the job interview.

Yes, that's a good place to start. The interview that gave me the job that turned me into a headless wonder.

In retrospect, I kind of wish I hadn't of gotten the gig.

Oh, and maybe I should say what my name is. Just for the record.

It's Rafe. Rafe Daquin.

I'm Rafe Daquin, and I'm a brain in a box.

Hi.

• • •

The reason I got the interview at all was because of a university friend of mine, Hart Schmidt. He works as a Colonial Union diplomat, which I always thought was the very definition of a thankless job, and in some recent downtime was in a bar on Phoenix Station and talking to the executive officer of the *Chandler,* a cargo hauler doing a standard triangle run between Phoenix, Huckleberry, and Erie. Not exactly a prestige job, but a gig is a gig. They can't all be glamour postings.

Anyway, in conversation the XO was griping about how when they got to Phoenix Station the *Chandler* was met by a bunch of law enforcement types. Seems one of the *Chandler*'s pilots had a little side thing going, down on the actual planet of Phoenix, the details of which I'm still a little hazy on but which involved blackmail, intimidation, graft, and bigamy, the last of these being one not so much like the others. The point was the *Chandler* was now down a pilot and needed one, fast.

Which was nice, because I was a pilot, and I needed a job. Also fast.

"This tells me you were a programmer before you were a pilot," the XO said, as he looked at my work history. We were in a burger joint on Phoenix Station; I had hauled my ass up from the planet as soon as Hart told me about the gig. The burgers were legend, but I wasn't really there for the culinary thrills. The XO's name was Lee Han and he had the look of someone who was going through the motions. I had a feeling that as long as I didn't admit to murdering adorable kittens in front of children, I was going to get the gig.

"I went to school for computer engineering," I said. "Graduated and did that and programming for a couple of years. Worked for Eyre Systems, mostly on starship navigation and maintenance software. You might have one of our setups on the *Chandler*."

"We do," Han said.

"I can throw in some technical support," I said. It was a joke.

I'm not entirely sure Han got that. "It's not the usual move from programming to piloting," he said.

"It's the programming that got me interested in piloting," I said. "I was one of the programmers who had some semblance of social skills, so eventually I was assigned to go up to Phoenix Station and work on ships to customize the software. So I spent a lot of time in ships and talking to crew and listening to them talk about where they've been in the universe. You do that long enough and just sitting at a desk pushing

code seems like a way to spend a lot of time wasting your life. I wanted to see what was out there. So I hustled my way into an apprentice piloting gig. That was seven years ago."

"Not exactly an upward move, paywise," Han said.

I shrugged. I figured that the shrug would come across as a casual and cool *Hey, some things are more important than money* rather than *Hey, I'm living with my parents who are beginning to resent that fact so I will take what I can get*. Anyway both were true. Lots of things can be more important than money when you lacked other options.

Not to paint my parents as the bad people here. It's just that they had made it clear that it was one thing to support me while I was working my way up a ladder, and another thing to support a thirty-two-year-old human while I was sitting on my ass at home between gigs. Maybe they wouldn't let me starve, but they weren't going to make me comfortable.

Which was fine. I wasn't out of work because I was lazy.

"Says here you've been out of work for the last nine months," Han said.

"I've been between ships, yes," I said.

"Want to explain that?" Han asked.

Well, there was no way around that one. "I'm being blackballed," I said.

"By whom?"

"By Captain Werner Ostrander of the *Lastan Falls*."

I thought I saw a faint smile on Han's lips when I said this. "Go on," he said.

"There's not much to say," I said. "I was second pilot on the *Baikal* and the first pilot wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, so when I heard there was an opportunity to move up to first pilot on the *Lastan,* I took it. What I didn't know was that there was a reason why the

Lastan had gone through six pilots in two years, and by the time I found out it was too late. I ended up breaking my contract."

"That must have been expensive."

"It was worth every penny," I said. "Also, as I was leaving the ship I dropped my mother's name to the chief steward. My mother's a labor lawyer. The class action suit against Ostrander that followed was, shall we say, *very* satisfying."

Han definitely smiled at that.

"But it also meant that Ostrander now goes out of his way to warn off anyone I try to get a pilot's job with," I said. "No one likes a troublemaker."

"No, no one does," Han agreed, and inside I groaned, because I figured this was where I just blew the gig. "But then, I crewed on the *Lastan Falls* for a year, early in my career."

I blinked. "You did?" I said.

"Yes," Han said. "Let's just say I can understand wanting to break your contract. And also that at some point I want to hear the details of that suit."

I grinned. "You got it, sir," I said.

"I'm going to be blunt, Mr. Daquin, this position is a step back for you," Han said. "It's third pilot, and it's a straight bread-and-butter trade run. We go here, we go to Huckleberry, we go to Erie, we repeat. It's not exciting, and just like the *Baikal,* there's little chance for advancement."

"Let me be equally blunt, sir," I said. "I've spent nine months at the bottom of a gravity well. You know as well as I do that if I spend too much more time there, I'm going to get stuck. You need another pilot right now so you don't lose time and money on your trade run. I get that. I need to get off the rock so I can have another shot at first pilot somewhere else without Ostrander's blackball over my head. I figure we're both in a spot and can help each other out."

"I just wanted to be sure everyone's expectations were in order," Han said.

"I have no illusions, sir."

"Good. Then I can give you a day to close out your business here."

I reached down and patted the crew bag at my feet. "Business closed. The only thing I have to do is find my friend Hart and buy him a drink for setting up this interview."

"If you can do that quickly there'll be a shuttle to the *Chandler* at gate thirty-six in a couple of hours."

"I'll be on it, sir," I said.

"Well, then," Han said, stood up, and extended his hand. "Welcome to the *Chandler,* pilot."

I took the hand. "Thank you, sir. Glad to be aboard."

• • •

I found Hart a half hour later, on the other side of Phoenix Station, in a reception for his boss, Ambassador Abumwe.

"She got the Meritorious Service Award," Hart said. He was on his second glass of spiked punch and he was never one who held his alcohol very well, so he was on his way to being a little tipsy. He was also dressed in a formal diplomatic uniform. I thought it made him look like a doorman. But then I had just spent the better part of the year in sweatpants, so who the hell was I to say.

"What did she do that was meritorious?" I asked.

"She kept her entire staff alive while Earth Station was being attacked, for starters," Hart said. "You heard about Earth Station?"

I nodded. The Colonial Union was pretty good at keeping bad news from reaching the civilians of the colonies, but some pieces of news are harder to hide than others. For example, the news that the Earth's sole space station was destroyed by unknown terrorists, killing thousands including the cream of the Earth's diplomatic corps, and that the Earth

blamed the Colonial Union for the attack and severed all diplomatic and economic ties.

Yeah, that one was a little hard to hide.

The Colonial Union's official story about it, said only that it had been a terrorist attack; the rest of it I had filled in from former shipmates and friends like Hart. When you live at the bottom of a gravity well, you only tend to hear the official story. The people who actually move between the stars, on the other hand, hear a lot more. It's hard to sell the official story to people who can see things for themselves.

"Some people saved themselves," said Harry Wilson, a friend of Hart's who he'd just introduced to me. Wilson was a member of the Colonial Defense Forces; his green skin gave him away. That and the fact that he looked the same age as my kid brother, but was probably something like 120 years old. Having a genetically modified, not-quite-human body had certain advantages, as long as you didn't mind being the same color as guacamole. "Your friend Hart here, for example. He got himself to an escape pod and ditched from Earth Station as it was literally blowing up around him."

"A slight exaggeration," Hart said.

"No, it actually was literally blowing up around you," Wilson said.

Hart waved him off and looked back over to me. "Harry's making it sound more dramatic than it was."

"It sounds pretty dramatic," I admitted.

"Space station *blowing up around him,*" Wilson said again, emphasizing the last part.

"I was unconscious for most of the trip down to Earth," Hart said. "I think that's probably a good thing."

I nodded toward Ambassador Abumwe, who I recognized from pictures, and who was on the other side of the reception hall, shaking hands with well-wishers in a receiving line. "How was the ceremony?"

"Painful," Wilson said.

"It was all right," Hart said.

"*Painful,*" Wilson repeated. "The guy who gave out the medal—"

"Assistant Secretary of State Tyson Ocampo," Hart said.

"—was a fatuous gasbag," Wilson continued. "I've met a lot of people in the diplomatic corps who were in love with the sound of their own voice, but this guy. He and his voice should just get a room."

"It wasn't that bad," Hart said to me.

"You saw Abumwe's face while that dude was going on," Wilson said, to Hart.

"Ocampo," Hart said, clearly pained that the assistant secretary of state was being referred to as "that dude." "The number two man in the department. And there was nothing going on with her face," Hart said.

"She was definitely wearing her 'please shut the hell up,' face," Wilson said, to me. "Trust me, I have seen it many times."

I looked over to Hart. "It's true," he said. "Harry has seen the ambassador's 'shut up' face more than most."

"Speak of the devil," Wilson said, and motioned slightly with his head. "Look who's coming this way." I glanced over and saw a middle-aged man in a resplendent Colonial Union diplomatic uniform, followed by a young woman, heading our direction.

"The fatuous gasbag?" I asked.

"Secretary *Ocampo,*" Hart said, emphatically.

"Same thing," Wilson said.

"Gentlemen," Ocampo said, coming up to us.

"Hello, Secretary Ocampo," Wilson said, very smoothly, and I thought I saw Hart relax maybe a tiny bit. "What may we do for you, sir?"

"Well, since you're standing between me and the punch, perhaps you would be so kind as to get me a cup," he said.

"Let me get that for you," Hart said, and nearly dropped his own glass in the process.

"Thank you," Ocampo said. "Schmidt, yes? One of Abumwe's people." He then turned to Wilson. "And you are?"

"Lieutenant Harry Wilson."

"Really," Ocampo said, and sounded impressed. "You're the one who saved the daughter of the secretary of state of the United States when Earth Station was destroyed."

"Danielle Lowen," Wilson said. "And yes. She's a diplomat in her own right, of course."

"Of course," Ocampo said. "But the fact that she's Secretary Lowen's daughter didn't hurt. It's one reason why the U.S. is one of the few countries on Earth that will speak to the Colonial Union in any capacity."

"I'm happy to be useful, sir," Wilson said. Hart handed him his punch.

"Thank you," Ocampo said, to Hart, and then turned his attention back to Wilson. "I understand you also skydived from Earth Station all the way down to Earth with Miss Lowen."

"That's correct, sir," Wilson said.

"That must have been some experience."

"I mostly remember trying not to go 'splat' at the end of it."

"Of course," Ocampo said. He turned to me next, registering my lack of dress uniform and the crew bag at my feet, and waited for me to identify myself.

"Rafe Daquin," I said, taking the hint. "I'm crashing the party, sir."

"He's a friend of mine who happened to be on station," Hart said. "He's a pilot on a trade ship."

"Oh," Ocampo said. "Which one?"

"The *Chandler,*" I said.

"Isn't that interesting," Ocampo said. "I've booked passage on the *Chandler*."

"You have?" I asked.

"Yes. It's been a few years since I've taken a vacation and I decided to take a month to hike the Connecticut mountains on Huckleberry. That's the *Chandler*'s next destination, unless I'm mistaken," Ocampo said.

"You could just take a department ship, I would think," I said.

Ocampo smiled. "It would look bad to commandeer a State Department ship as a personal taxi, I'm afraid. As I understand it the *Chandler* lets out a couple of staterooms for passengers. I and Vera here," he nodded toward his assistant, "have taken them. How are they?"

"The staterooms?" I asked. Ocampo nodded. "I'm not sure."

"Rafe has just been hired as of about an hour ago," Hart said. "He hasn't even been on the ship yet. He's taking a shuttle over in about an hour."

"That's the same shuttle you'll be on, sir," Vera said to Ocampo.

"So we'll experience it for the first time together," the secretary said, to me.

"I suppose that's true," I said. "If you would like I would be happy to escort you and your assistant to the shuttle gate, when you're ready to depart."

"Thank you, I'd appreciate that," Ocampo said. "I'll have Vera tell you when we're ready. Until then, gentlemen." He nodded and wandered off with his punch, Vera following behind.

"Very diplomatic," Wilson said to me, once he was gone.

"You jumped out of an exploding space station?" I said to him, changing the subject.

"It wasn't exploding that much when I jumped," Wilson said.

"And you got out in an escape pod just in time," I said to Hart. "I'm clearly in the wrong line of space travel for excitement."

"Trust me," Wilson said. "You don't want that much excitement."

• • •

The *Chandler,* as advertised, was not exciting.

But it's not supposed to be. I said before that the *Chandler* had blocked out a triangle run. That means that you have three destinations, all of which want something that's made and exported on the previous planet. So, for example, Huckleberry is a colony that's largely agrarian —a large percentage of the land mass there is in a temperate zone that's great for human crops. We take things like wheat, corn, and gaalfruit and a few other crops and take them to Erie. Erie colonists pay a premium for Huckleberry agricultural products, because, I don't know, I think they think they're healthier or something. Whatever reason, they want 'em so we take them there. In return we load up on all sorts of rare earth metals, which Erie has lots of.

We take those to Phoenix, which is the center of high-technology manufacturing for the Colonial Union. And from there, we get things like medical scanners and PDAs and everything else it's cheaper to mass produce and ship than try to put together yourselves in a home printer, and take those to Huckleberry, whose technology manufacturing base is pretty small. Wash, rinse, repeat. As long as you're working the triangle in the right direction, you'll get rich.

But it's not exciting, for whatever definition of "exciting" you want to have. These three colonies are well established and protected; Huckleberry's the youngest and it's nearly a century old at this point, and Phoenix is the oldest and best defended of any of the Colonial Union planets. So you're not exploring new worlds by trading there. You're unlikely to run into pirates or other bad people. You're not meeting strange new aliens, or really any aliens at all. You're shipping

food, ore, and gadgets. This isn't the romance of space. This is you and space in a nice, comfortable rut.

But again, I didn't give a crap about any of that. I'd seen enough of space and had the occasional bit of excitement; when I was on the *Baikal,* we were pursued for four days by pirates and eventually had to ditch our cargo. They don't chase you anymore when you do that because then you have nothing they want. Usually. Sometimes when you ditch your cargo they get pissed off and then try to send a missile into your engines to register their displeasure.

So, yeah. As Harry Wilson suggested, excitement can be overrated.

Anyway, right now I didn't want exciting. What I wanted was to work. If that meant babysitting the *Chandler*'s navigational system while it crunched data for a run that it had done a thousand times before, that was fine by me. At the end of the stint I'd have the blackball off my career. That was also fine by me.

The *Chandler* itself was your basic cargo hauler, which is to say a former Colonial Defense Forces frigate, repurposed for cargo and trade. There were purpose-built cargo haulers, of course, but they were expensive and tended to be built and used by large shipping lines. The *Chandler* was the sole ship owned by its small consortium of owners. They got the obsolete frigate that became the *Chandler* at an auction.

When I did my research of the *Chandler* before the interview (always do your research; I didn't with the *Lastan Falls* and it cost me), I saw pictures of the frigate at the auction, where it was sold "as-is." Somewhere along the way it had gotten the living crap beat out of it. But refurbished, it had been doing its run for almost two decades. I figured it wouldn't accidentally spill me into space.

I took the shuttle ride with Secretary Ocampo and his aide (whose last name I finally learned was Briggs; that came from the crew and passenger manifest, not from the secretary), and said good-bye to them at the ship. Then I reported to Han and my immediate boss, First Pilot

Clarine Bolduc, and then to Quartermaster Seidel, who assigned me quarters. "You're in luck," she said. "You get private quarters. At least until we hit Erie, when we take on some new crew. Then you'll get two roommates. Enjoy your privacy while you can."

I went to my quarters and they were the size of a broom closet. Technically you could fit three people in it. But you wouldn't want to close the door or you'd run out of oxygen. I got to pick my bunk, though, so I had that going for me.

At evening mess Bolduc introduced me around to the other officers and department heads.

"You're not going to be running any scams in your spare time?" asked Chieko Tellez, who was assistant cargo chief, as I sat down with my tray.

"I did a thorough background check," Han said, to her. "He's clean."

"I'm joking," Tellez said, to Han. She turned back to me. "You know about the guy you're replacing, right?"

"I heard a little about it," I said.

"A shame," Tellez said. "He was a nice guy."

"As long as you're willing to overlook corruption, graft, and bigamy," Bolduc said.

"He never did any of that to me, and that's what really counts," Tellez said, and then glanced over at me, smiling.

"I can't tell whether you're joking or not," I admitted.

"Chieko is never not joking," Bolduc said. "And now you know."

"Some of us like a little humor," Tellez said, to Bolduc.

"Joking is not the same thing as humor," Bolduc said.

"Hmph," Tellez said. It didn't look like she was particularly put out by the comment. I figured she and Bolduc ribbed each other on a frequent basis, which was not a bad thing. Officers who got on okay were a sign of a happy ship.

Tellez turned her attention back to me. "You came over on the shuttle with those State Department mucky-mucks, right?"

"I did," I said.

"Did they say why they were on the ship?"

"Secretary Ocampo is going on vacation on Huckleberry," I said. "We're headed that way so he and his aide rented a couple of spare staterooms."

"If I were him I would have just taken a department ship," Bolduc said.

"He said it wouldn't look very good if he did," I said.

"I'm sure he's actually worried about that," Bolduc said.

"Seidel said that Ocampo told her that he wanted to travel inconspicuously and without having to feel like he was dragging his title around," Han said.

"Do you believe that?" Bolduc asked. Han shrugged. Bolduc then turned to me. "You talked to him, yeah?"

"Sure," I said.

"That sound reasonable to you?"

I thought back on what Wilson said about Ocampo being in love with the sound of his own voice, and thought about the shuttle ride, after the polite conversation was over, listening to Ocampo dictating notes to Vera Briggs. "He doesn't strike me as the kind who prefers to be inconspicuous, no," I said.

"Maybe he's just screwing his aide and wants to be inconspicuous about *that,*" Tellez said.

"No, that's not it," I said.

"Explain," Tellez said.

I shrugged. "I didn't get that vibe from either of them."

"And how is your vibe sense in general, Daquin?"

"It's all right."

"What's your *vibe* about me?" Tellez asked.

"You have a quirky sense of humor," I said.

"His vibe sense works just fine," Bolduc said.

Tellez shot a look at Bolduc, who ignored it. "Why would anyone vacation on Huckleberry anyway?" she said. "We've been to Huckleberry. A lot. There's nothing there worth a vacation."

"He said he wanted to hike the Connecticut mountains," I said. "Whatever those are."

"I hope he packed a jacket," Han said. "The Connecticuts are a polar range, and it's winter for Huckleberry's northern hemisphere."

"He had several trunks," I said. "His aide Vera complained that he brought three times the clothing he'd need. There's probably a jacket or two in there."

"Let's hope so," Han said. "Otherwise, he's in for a disappointing vacation."

But as it turned out there was no vacation at all.

• • •

I looked up from my chair and saw Captain Thao and Lee Han looking down at me, Thao with a severely pissed-off look on her face, and my first thought was*, Shit, I don't even know what I did wrong this time*.

My second thought was to be confused as to why I was seeing her at all. I was third pilot, which meant I got the shifts where the captain was usually not on deck; she was usually sleeping or tending to other ship duties when I was in the pilot's chair. For the three days I'd been piloting, XO Han sat in the command chair while I sat in mine, and we did a whole lot of nothing—the course from Phoenix Station to our skip point was plotted for us by Phoenix Station and all I had to do was make sure we didn't drift for one reason or another.

We hadn't. I could have napped through all of my shifts and it would have had the same effect.

We were twelve hours out from skip. At that time the captain would be in the chair, Bolduc would be piloting with Second Pilot Schreiber

assisting, and with any luck I would be asleep in my bunk. Having the captain on deck now meant something was out of whack; that she was standing over my chair said maybe what was out of whack had to do with me. What it was I had no idea. Like I said, we were exactly where we needed to be for the skip. There was literally nothing I could have been doing wrong.

"Yes, ma'am?" I said. When in doubt, be ready to take an order.

Captain Thao held out a memory card. I looked at it, stupidly. "It's a memory card," I said.

"I know what it is," Captain Thao said. "I need you to help me with it."

"All right," I said. "How?"

"You worked on the piloting systems as a programmer, yes? Lee tells me you did."

"I did several years ago," I said, glancing over at Han, whose expression was blank.

"So you know how it works."

"I haven't worked on the code for the most recent versions of the software, but it's built using the same language and compilers," I said. "I wouldn't have a problem catching up on it."

"The piloting system has the ability to accept encoded commands, yes? Destinations can be plugged in without openly revealing what they are."

"Sure," I said. "That's a standard feature. It was put into military piloting software so if a ship or drone is captured, it'd be harder for whoever captured it to find out its destination. We don't usually use the secure mode on trade ships because there's no point. We have to file courses with the Colonial Union anyway. They know where we're going."

"I have an encrypted destination on this memory card," Thao said. "Can you tell me where it is?"

"No," I said. "It's encrypted." And then I realized that it was entirely possible that last comment came out in my "condescending nerd" voice, so I quickly added to it. "What I mean is that I would need the encryption key for it. I don't have it."

"The system has it," Thao said.

"Right, but the system doesn't tell *us* what it is," I said. "The point of the secure mode is to let the navigation computer and only the navigation computer know where the ship is going."

"Could you crack it without a key?"

"The encryption?" I asked. Thao nodded. "How much time do I have?"

"How long until skip?"

I checked my monitor. "Twelve hours, twenty-three minutes."

"That long."

"No," I said. "If you gave me a month I could maybe do it. Or if I had passwords or biometrics or whatever it was that let whoever gave you that memory card into the encryption system in the first place." I motioned to the card. "Was that encrypted on the *Chandler*?"

"No."

"I would need more time than we have, then, ma'am."

Captain Thao nodded, moody, and looked over to Han.

"May I ask what's going on, ma'am?" I said.

"No," Captain Thao said. She reached out to me with the memory card. "I need you to put this new destination into the navigation system. Let Han know when you've done it and the new destination is confirmed."

I took the card. "It'll take about a minute and a half," I said.

"Fine," Thao said. "Tell Han anyway." She left without saying anything else. I looked over at Han. He was still working on his utterly neutral face.

• • •

"Mr. Daquin," Secretary Ocampo said, as he opened the door to his stateroom and saw me standing on the other side of it. "This is unexpected. Come inside, please." He stood aside to let me in.

I entered the stateroom, which was roughly twice the size of my own, which is to say, the size of two broom closets. A lot of the space was taken up by Ocampo's luggage, which was, as Vera Briggs hinted, a lot for a month-long trip. But Ocampo struck me as a likely candidate for being a clotheshorse, so maybe that volume of luggage wasn't unusual for him.

"I apologize for it being cramped," Ocampo said.

"It's bigger than my quarters," I said.

"I would hope so!" Ocampo said, and then laughed. "No offense," he said, afterwards.

"None taken," I said.

"We're fortunate Vera isn't in here as well, we might not be able to move," Ocampo said, and sat in the chair next to his very small table. "Now, let me guess why you're here, Mr. Daquin. I'm guessing that sometime in the last few hours, your captain came to you with a new destination, is that correct?"

"It might be," I said.

"Might be indeed," Ocampo replied. "And this new destination is secret, and now I strongly suspect that you and the rest of the *Chandler* crew are having a merry little time speculating about where this destination is, why we might be going there, and why your captain is following an order that no one should have been able to give her. Is that about right?"

"That's about the size of it, yes."

"And I bet you were volunteered by the rest of the crew to come see me about it, because you and I shared a boat ride over to the *Chandler*."

"No, sir," I said. "You're right that the crew is talking about it. But none of them put me up to this. I came on my own."

"That's either initiative or stupidity, Mr. Daquin."

"Yes, sir."

"Maybe a little of both."

"That's equally possible, sir."

Ocampo laughed. "You understand that if I can't tell your captain where we're going, I'm not going to be able to tell you."

"I understand that," I said. "I'm not here about the 'what,' sir. I'm here about the 'why.'"

"The why," Ocampo said.

"Yes," I said. "As in why the number two person in all of the Colonial Union State Department is pretending to go on vacation to an arctic mountain range and using a cargo ship to get there, instead of just taking a State Department ship with a formal diplomatic mission on it to wherever and whomever he is meeting and negotiating with."

"Well," Ocampo said, after a moment. "And here I thought I was being clever about it."

"You were, sir," I said. "But it looks different inside the ship than out of it."

"Fair enough. Have a seat, Daquin," Ocampo said, motioning to his bunk. I sat. "Let's talk theoretical scenarios for a moment. Are you okay with that?"

"Sure," I said.

"What do you know about how the Colonial Union is doing these days?"

"I know we're not on very good terms with the Earth anymore."

Ocampo snorted. "You've unintentionally made the understatement of the year. It's more accurate to say the Earth hates the Colonial Union's guts, thinks we are evil, and wants us all to die. They blame us

for the destruction of Earth Station, which was their major egress into space. They think we did it."

"And we didn't."

"No, of course not. But many of the ships used in the attack were pirated from the Colonial Union. You've heard about that, at least? Cargo ships like this one being captured and turned into attack vehicles?"

I nodded. This was one of the more wild rumors out there—that pirates, or someone posing as pirates, would take and board ships, but instead of the cargo, they were after the ships themselves. They would use the ships to attack targets in the Colonial Union and in the Conclave, a big political union of alien races.

I thought it was wild because it didn't make much sense. Not that the ships were taken; I knew that was true. Everyone in space knows someone whose ship was lost. But it didn't make sense to use cargo ships as attack platforms. There were easier ways to strike both the Colonial Union and the Conclave.

But now Ocampo was telling me that part wasn't just a rumor. That these things were happening. One more reason, I guess, to be glad to be doing a trade run safely inside the Colonial Union's borders.

Except now we weren't doing that safe trade run anymore.

"Because the ships were originally from the Colonial Union, it looks like the Colonial Union attacked," Ocampo said. "And so our diplomatic relations with nearly every nation on Earth are entirely shut off. Even those we're not entirely shunned by we still have to be very careful approaching. Understand me so far?"

I nodded again.

Ocampo nodded in response. "In which case, Mr. Daquin, ask yourself: If the number two man of the Colonial Union State Department wanted to pry open diplomatic relations with the Earth,

even just a crack, in a way that didn't immediately require everyone involved to strike a political pose, how might he do it?"

"By pretending to go on vacation but actually commandeering a trade ship to take him to an unofficial meeting at a secret destination, perhaps," I said.

"That might be one way, yes," Ocampo agreed.

"But he would still need to convince that ship's captain."

"Convincing takes on many forms," Ocampo said. "One form might be an official request from the Colonial Union itself, the refusal of which would cause the ship in question to be refused dock at any space station the Colonial Union controls. Which would be all of them, in Colonial Union space."

"And the refusal would happen because the captain didn't play ball."

"Well, officially there would be all sorts of reasons given," Ocampo said. "It would vary from station to station and from circumstance to circumstance. But in reality, it would be the Colonial Union expressing its displeasure at the lack of cooperation, yes."

"I don't imagine the captain would be happy about that."

"No, probably not," Ocampo agreed.

"There's also the problem that the ship, and its owners and crew, would take a loss because their trade route was messed with."

"If something like that were to happen, in theory, the ship, and its owners and crew, would be fully compensated by the Colonial Union for any losses, with additional compensation for time and other incurred expenses."

"Really."

"Oh, yes," Ocampo said. "And now you know why it doesn't happen very often. It's expensive as hell."

"And you told the captain all this."

"I might have," Ocampo said. "But if I did, I don't imagine it made her any happier. No captain likes being ordered about on her own ship. But at this point there's nothing to be done for it. How do *you* feel about it, Mr. Daquin?"

"I don't know. Better, I suppose, because I have some idea what's going on. At least, if what you're telling me is accurate, sir."

"I haven't told you anything, Mr. Daquin," Ocampo said. "We're just having a conversation about possibilities. And this seems like a reasonable possibility to me. Does it seem like a reasonable possibility to you?"

I thought it did.

• • •

The next day, I got shot in the head.

Before that happened, though, I fell out of my bunk.

The falling out of the bunk was not the important part. The important part was how I fell out of it. I was shoved—or more accurately, the *Chandler* was shoved, and I pretty much stayed where I was. Which meant one second I had a bunk under me and the next second I didn't, and then I was tumbling through the air, toward a bulkhead.

When this was happening I had two thoughts. The first thought, which if I'm truthful about it took up most of my brain, was *Whaaaaaa,* because first I was airborne, and then I smacked into the wall.

The second thought, in the part of my brain that wasn't freaking out, was that something serious had happened to the ship. The artificial gravity field on the *Chandler* and nearly all space ships is incredibly robust—it has to be, or even simple acceleration would turn human bodies into jelly. It also acts to dampen skew and yaw inside a ship. It takes a lot of energy, basically, to shove a ship so hard that people fall out of their bunks.

There was also the fact that while I was shoved out of my bunk, I wasn't falling. Which meant the artificial gravity wasn't working. Something happened to knock it out.

Conclusion: We either hit something or were hit by something.

Which meant that the part of my brain that was previously going *Whaaaaaa* was now going, *Oh shit we're all gonna die, we're dead we're dead we're so fucking dead.*

And then the lights went out.

All of this took maybe a second.

The good news is I peed before going to sleep.

Then the emergency lights clicked on, as did the emergency gravity, rated at .2 standard G. It wasn't a lot, and it wouldn't be on for long. The whole point of it was to give the crew enough time to strap things down and lock them away. Everything that had been previously flying around in my quarters—toothpaste tubes, unhampered clothes, me—began to settle to the floor. I touched down, quickly put on some pants, and opened the door to my room.

And immediately saw Chieko Tellez running down the hall.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Power's out," she said as she passed me. "We skipped and then the power went bye-bye."

"Yeah, but how?"

"Hey, man, I'm just a cargo monkey," she said. "You're bridge crew. *You* tell *me*." And then she was gone.

She had a point. I started on my way to the bridge.

Along the way I saw Secretary Ocampo, who looked mussed and like he hadn't gotten much sleep. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Power's out."

"How'd that happen?"

I just had this conversation, on the other side. "I'm heading to the bridge to find out."

Ocampo nodded. “I’ll come with you.” I didn’t think this was a particularly great idea, but I just nodded and kept going, assuming that Ocampo was following me.

The bridge was busy but controlled. The first-shift bridge crew were at their stations, offering up status reports to Thao, who took them in and asked questions. I nodded to Ocampo, who had indeed followed me in, and then went over to Han.

“You’re not on duty,” he said to me as I came up.

“Thought you might want some help.”

“We already have a pilot.” Han nodded to Bolduc.

“Available for other things.”

“Fine,” Han said. “See if Womack needs help with the sensors.” I headed over to Sherita Womack, handling the sensors. Han then turned his attention to Ocampo. “You’re not part of this crew, Secretary Ocampo. You’re officially in the way.”

“Thought I might be useful,” Ocampo said.

“You’re not,” Han said. “Go back to your stateroom.”

“Belay that,” Thao said, turning to the conversation. “I want him here. I’ve got questions for him, and he damn well better have answers for me. Don’t you move, Secretary.”

“I’m at your service, Captain,” Ocampo said.

Thao said nothing to this, and switched her attention to Womack. “Sensors. Report. Tell me if we hit anything coming out of skip.”

“Doesn’t appear so, ma’am,” Womack said. “If we hit anything, we’d probably be dead.”

“Depends on the size of what we hit,” I said. “We get peppered with tiny bits of dust all the time.”

“Those aren’t going to knock out our power,” Womack said. “They’re not going to shift us off course, either.”

“How far have we shifted?” Thao asked.

Womack shrugged. “Can’t give you a precise reading because our inertial sensors are screwed up. So are our outside sensors. I can’t tell you what’s out there, ma’am.”

“Anything before the sensors went out?”

“Nothing pinged,” Womack said. “One second there’s nothing but vacuum and the next we’re jolted and our power is screwed.” Womack stopped talking and frowned at something in her diagnostics screen. I craned my head in to look.

“What is it?” Thao asked.

“The diagnostics say the outside sensors should be working fine,” I said, going off the readings on the screen.

“But we’re not getting anything from them,” Womack said. “Communications should also be working but I’m getting nothing.”

“We’re being jammed, maybe,” I said.

“I think so,” Womack said, and looked over to Thao.

The bridge went silent at this. Thao nodded at the report and then turned her attention back to Ocampo. “You want to explain this?” she said.

“I can’t,” Ocampo said.

“You said that you were meeting diplomats from Earth.”

“Earth and the Conclave both, yes,” Ocampo said. This was slightly different than what he told me, but then he said he wasn’t actually telling me anything, so.

“Why would *diplomats* want to jam our sensors?” Thao asked.

“They wouldn’t,” Ocampo said. “This is where we’re supposed to meet. They knew I was coming and they knew I was coming on this ship. They know we’re not a threat.”

“And yet our sensors are jammed and we’re sitting here blind,” Thao said.

“It could be pirates,” Han said.

"No," Thao said. "Pirates follow trade routes. This isn't a trade route. We followed a route to a secret location only Secretary Ocampo's diplomat friends would know we'd be at. Isn't that right, Ocampo? Isn't this trip supposed to be *top secret*?" The sarcasm of those last two words coming out of the captain's mouth was unmistakable.

Ocampo looked uncomfortable with this line of questioning. "Information about the Colonial Union's diplomatic missions has been leaky in the last year," he said, finally.

"What does that mean?" asked Thao.

"It means that the State Department might have a problem with spies," Ocampo said. "I made every precaution so this information would be secure. Apparently it wasn't enough."

"You have spies?" Thao said. "Spies for whom? The Conclave? Earth?"

"Either," Ocampo said. "Or spies for someone else."

"Who else?"

Ocampo shrugged at this. Thao shot him a look that was a textbook example of disgust. Then she turned back to Womack and me. "There was nothing on the sensors before the power went out."

"No, ma'am," Womack said. "Nothing but clear space to the skip point."

"Outside sensors still down."

"Yes, ma'am," Womack said. "They should be working fine. They're just not. I can't tell you why."

Thao turned to Han. "Tell someone to go to an airlock and look out the goddamned portal, please," she said.

Han nodded and spoke briefly into a headset; presumably somewhere belowdecks a crew member was heading to an airlock. "We should start forming security details, Captain," he said, after he was done.

"You think whoever it is out there is going to board us," Thao said.

"I do," Han said. "You said it yourself, whoever this is, they're not your typical pirates. I think the only thing of value on the *Chandler* to whoever they are is the *Chandler*."

"No," Thao said, looking back at Ocampo. "There's something else here, too."

A ping came up from Womack's console. We both turned to look at it.

"What is it?" Thao asked.

"An outside signal," I said.

Womack picked up her headset. "It's addressing you specifically, Captain," she said to Thao a moment later.

"Put it on speaker," Thao said. Womack switched it over and nodded to the captain. "This is Captain Eliza Thao," she said.

"Captain Thao, you have three Melierax Series Seven missiles locked onto your ship," a voice said. It had that metallic, grating tone that made it clear it was artificially generated. "The first will impact and detonate midships, at a point where the structural integrity of the *Chandler* is the weakest. This will not destroy your ship but will kill many of your crew, and open a direct path to your engines, where the second missile will strike. That will vaporize two-thirds of your ship instantly, killing nearly every one of your crew. The third missile is for mop up.

"As a trade ship, you have no significant defenses. Even if you had, we have jammed your external sensors. Your communications are also jammed and you are light-years away from any civilian or CDF station in any event. Your skip drone launchers are already targeted by particle beams. Your power is down and you will discover, if you have not already, that you will be unable to get it back online before your emergency battery power exhausts itself. If you were not already

targeted for destruction by our missiles, you and your crew would freeze, and those who did not would asphyxiate."

"Listen to me—" Thao began.

"If you interrupt again we will launch our missiles," the voice said.

Thao shut up.

"This is not a negotiation or a parley," the voice continued. "We are telling you what you will have to do in order for you and your crew to survive the next few hours.

"And it is this. You will open your airlocks for external entry. You will assemble your entire crew in your ship's cargo hold. We will enter your ship and take control of it. If any of your crew is found outside of the cargo hold when we board, we will destroy the ship and everyone on it. If any of your crew attempts to attack us or thwart us in taking control of your ship, we will destroy the ship and everyone on it. If you attempt to abandon ship, we will target and destroy the lifepods and destroy the ship and anyone remaining on it. If you and your crew do anything other than assemble in the cargo hold and await further instruction, we will destroy the ship and everyone on it.

"You will have five minutes from right now to signal your understanding of these directions. You will then have one hour to signal that these directions have been fulfilled. If we do not receive both, then your ship and everyone on it will be destroyed.

"That is all."

"Is that channel still clear?" Thao asked Womack.

Womack looked at her panel. "Yes," she said. "Everything else is still jammed up."

Thao turned to Ocampo. "These aren't your *friends,* I assume."

"No," Ocampo said. "This is definitely not how they would have greeted us."

"And what do you think has happened to your friends?"

"I don't know," Ocampo said. "It's entirely possible they were attacked, too."

"Options," Thao said, turning to Han.

"Assuming they are telling us the truth about the missiles, none," Han said. "Whoever that was is right. We have no real defenses. We can't outrun them. And even if we direct all emergency power to life support, we don't have much time."

"And if they're not telling us the truth about the missiles?"

"Then we launch lifepods, fight them when they arrive on the ship, and destroy the ship ourselves if necessary," Han said. "To Hell with these guys."

"We'll fight, Captain," I said. I don't know why I said it. I wasn't thinking about fighting at any point before. It just came up in my brain at that moment. It was like Lee Han said: To Hell with these guys, whoever they were. And if that meant fighting them with sticks, that was better than nothing.

I looked around the bridge and saw people nodding. We were all ready for a fight.

Thao smiled at me and then nodded, as a way of letting me know my comment had been registered and appreciated. Then she turned back to Han, who was not smiling. "But," she said to him.

"But they already have knocked out our power in a way we couldn't and didn't track," Han said. "They're jamming our communications and external sensors. That says to me they have more up their sleeves. Even if they don't, if we fight them and repel them we'll likely take losses and additional damage to the ship. We'll all end up on lifepods just to survive. In which case whoever *they* are"—Han motioned outward, signifying our attackers—"can still take the ship without any of us on it. In which case, we've risked everything for nothing."

Thao turned to Bolduc, who was the pilot on duty. "Any chance we could skip out of this?"

"No," Bolduc said. "We entered this system near a planet. Under the best of circumstances we'd need three days to get to skip distance."

"We can't skip without engines anyway," Han said.

"When can we get them back?" Thao asked.

"Eller estimated twenty hours," Han said, speaking of the chief engineer. "Our emergency power is going to last six. We'd still have to get the crew to lifepods. Whoever stayed would find breathing difficult until the power's completely back."

"No matter what, we lose the ship," Thao said.

Han paused an almost infinitesimally small amount of time before replying. "Realistically, yes," he said. "Even if whoever is attacking us did *nothing*, we'd still have to get nearly all the crew to lifepods. And I don't think it's realistic to assume that whoever is attacking us will do nothing. They've already done enough."

Thao sat for a moment, silent. Ocampo and everyone else on the bridge waited, conscious of the timeline for a response.

"Fuck," Thao said. She nodded to Womack. "Tell them we understand their terms. The airlocks will be open within the hour. We'll signal when the crew is in the cargo hold."

Womack blinked, swallowed, and nodded. She turned to her console.

Thao turned to Han. "Tell the crew. We're under a deadline here." Han moved.

Then Thao looked over to Ocampo. "Well, Mr. Ocampo. I'm beginning to think I should have refused your request." Ocampo opened his mouth to reply, but Thao was already ignoring him.

• • •

The three creatures approaching Captain Thao wore black, were armed, and had knees that went the wrong way. One had something

resembling a handgun, and the two others had longer weapons I assumed were automatic rifles of some sort. A larger squad of the alien creatures held back and fanned out through the cargo hold, getting good vantages to fire into us, the *Chandler* crew. There were about sixty of us, totally unarmed. It wouldn't take them long to go through us, if they wanted to.

"What the hell are they?" Chieko Tellez whispered to me. She was standing next to me in the group.

"They're Rraey," I said.

"Not friendly," she said. "Not counting these ones, I mean."

"No," I said. The Colonial Union didn't spend a lot of time advertising specific battles, but I knew enough to know we'd kicked the Rraey's asses pretty seriously more than once in the last decade or so. There was no reason to believe any of this was going to end well for us.

The three Rraey reached Captain Thao. "Identify your pilots," the center Rraey said to her. It spoke in its own language, which was translated by a small object clipped to its clothes.

"Tell me why," Thao said.

The Rraey raised its weapon and shot Lee Han, standing with the captain, in the face. Han lifted in the low gravity and took a long time to fall to the deck.

"Identify your pilots," the Rraey said again, after most of the shouting from the crew had subsided.

Thao remained silent. The creature raised its weapon again, this time at her head. I considered stepping forward. Tellez suddenly grabbed my arm, guessing what I was thinking of doing. "Don't you fucking *dare,*" she whispered.

"Stop it," someone said. I followed the sound of the voice to Secretary Ocampo. He stepped forward, away from the *Chandler* crew. "There's no need for that, Commander Tvann."

The Rraey turned its head to look at Ocampo. So did Thao. I think she realized, like I just did, that Ocampo had called the creature by name and rank.

"Secretary Ocampo," Tvann said, nodding its head in salute. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to identify a pilot for me."

"Of course," Ocampo said. Then he pointed into crew members, directly at me. "He's one. Take him."

Two Rraey peeled off and came at me. Tellez put herself in front of me. One of the two advancing Rraey raised its weapon at her. "You son of a bitch," Thao shouted at Ocampo, and the crew of the *Chandler* began to agitate.

"Quiet," Ocampo said. He said it in a loud voice that he was clearly proud of, the sort of speaking voice that had been polished by years of diplomatic speeches and the assumption that people would naturally listen to what he had to say.

And it worked; even the Rraey coming to get me stopped and looked at him.

He held up a hand to further the call for silence. The crew hushed to a low murmur.

"You will survive this," Ocampo said, loudly. "Let me say this again: You *will* survive this. But only if you listen to me right now and do as I say. So listen. Quietly."

The *Chandler* crew was dead silent now.

"I regret the death of Lee Han," Ocampo said. "Rraey commanders are not accustomed to having orders questioned or refused. There will be no more killings unless you resist or disobey. I also recognize that from your point of view this looks very much like both piracy and treason. I assure you that nothing could be further from the truth. I am sorry I don't have time to explain it to you further.

"Now. I require the *Chandler* and I require a pilot. I am taking the ship and I am taking Mr. Daquin here. As for the rest of you, very

shortly you will be escorted to the *Chandler*'s lifepods. The lifepods will be launched and immediately after the *Chandler* has skipped away —three days from now—an emergency drone will be sent to Phoenix Station and the Colonial Union with the precise coordinates to this system and your lifepods. You know that the Colonial Union keeps ships at skip distance specifically for rescue missions of this type.

"So you will be rescued in four days, five days at the outside. The lifepods are rated for seven days under a full load. You will be rescued with time to spare.

"I repeat: *You will survive this*. But in order to do that you must now offer no resistance. You must not fight. You must not argue. If you do, the Rraey here will show no hesitation in putting you down. I want you to see your family and friends again. I want you to make it back safely to Colonial Union space. Help me help you get there. Let's get to it."

"I don't believe you," Thao said, loudly, to Ocampo.

"That's fair," Ocampo said. He nodded to Tvann.

The Rraey shot the captain in the forehead. She collapsed, dead.

Ocampo waited for the screams to die down. "As I said, you must not argue. Now follow the Rraey's orders, please." He turned away from the *Chandler* crew and motioned to Commander Tvann to follow him.

The two Rraey continued toward me, and I saw Tellez tense up to fight.

"No," I said to her.

"They're going to kill you," she said.

"They're going to kill you if you try to stop them," I pointed out.

"We're dead anyway," she said.

"I'd rather you take your chances with a lifepod," I said. I put my hand on her shoulder as the Rraey arrived. "Thank you, Chieko. I appreciate that you're willing to fight for me. I really do."

"Well, you would for me, right?" Tellez asked.

"Yes," I said. "It's what I'm doing now." I nodded to the Rraey, letting them know I was ready to go. One of them grabbed me by the shoulder, and we marched away from Tellez and the crew of the *Chandler*.

I barely knew any of them.

I was already feeling guilty that I knew I was going to survive.

I heard Secretary Ocampo talking to Tvann as I was marched up to him. "How much damage did you do to the ship?" he asked the Rraey.

"Very little and none that would threaten the ship structurally," Tvann said. "We only needed to disrupt and disable certain systems."

"Good," Ocampo said. "The *Chandler*'s chief engineer said he could get the power back online in twenty hours. Can you do it in the same timeframe?"

"We will take less time than that," Tvann said. "We have experience with this, Secretary. As you know."

"Indeed I do."

"It will be good to have you with us full-time now."

"Thank you, Commander Tvann," Ocampo said. "I agree."

"What do you want to do with the rest of the crew?" Tvann said.

"I told them we'd put them on the lifepods. Let's do that."

"It will be a shame to lose the lifepods."

Ocampo shrugged. "They're really not going to be needed, are they?"

"No," Tvann said.

"Then no real loss. One thing, though. One of the lifepods needs to be destroyed. It has to be plausible that my body isn't recoverable. Having a lifepod torn up will help with that."

"Of course," Tvann asked. "You have an assistant, yes? Will she be going into the lifepods?"

"Offer her the choice of the lifepods or coming with us," Ocampo said. "How much you want to hint to her that the lifepods are a bad idea is up to you."

"She did not know?"

"About this? No. This was a secret, remember?"

"I believe I will simply order her to come with us. Less complicated that way."

"It's your show," Ocampo said, and clapped the Rraey on the shoulder, dismissing it. Tvann went to direct the herding of the *Chandler* crew. Then Ocampo turned his attention to me.

"Well, Mr. Daquin," Ocampo said. "Today is your lucky day. You will survive this day, after a fashion."

"There's no emergency drone, is there?" I asked.

"You mean, to let the Colonial Union know about the *Chandler*'s crew," Ocampo said.

"Yeah," I said.

Ocampo shook his head. "No. No, there is not."

"So you're going to let everyone on the *Chandler* suffocate in their lifepods."

"That's the most likely scenario, yes," Ocampo said. "This isn't a populated system. No one else is likely to come by in the next week. Or year."

"Why?" I asked. "Why are you doing this?"

"You're asking why I've apparently become a traitor?"

"For starters," I said.

"The full answer is too long for the time we have now," Ocampo said. "So I'll just say that the real question is where one's loyalties should be: with the Colonial Union, or with humanity. The two are not the same thing, you know. And I've come to realize that my loyalties are with humanity first. The Colonial Union's time is coming to an end,

Mr. Daquin. I'm just trying to make sure that when it ends, it doesn't take the human race with it."

"If your loyalty is to humanity, then prove it," I said. I gestured back to the crew of the *Chandler*. "They're humans, Secretary Ocampo. Save these people. Send a skip drone back to Phoenix Station letting them know where they are. Don't let them die in the lifepods."

"It's noble of you to try to save them," Ocampo said. "I wish I could grant your wish, Mr. Daquin. I truly and sincerely wish I could. But for now the Colonial Union can't know that I've abandoned them. They need to think I'm dead. That only happens if there's no one to report otherwise. I'm sorry."

"You said you needed me as a pilot," I said. "I won't help you unless you save them."

"I think you'll change your mind," Ocampo said, and nodded to one of the Rraey.

My feet were knocked out from under me and I was pushed down hard to the floor of the cargo hold.

Something was pressed to the back of my head. It felt like a gun.

I felt the vibration of the gun firing at the same time I felt something hit the back of my skull.

I don't remember anything after that.

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PART TWO

So now we're at the part where I actually become a brain in a box.

I don't remember the first part of it at all. I was shot in the back of the head point-blank with some sort of electrical stun gun; I was out. After I got zapped, I was taken to the Rraey's ship, where a doctor of some sort (at least I hope it was a doctor) put me into a medically induced coma; the first step of the process. I was unconscious through the skip, three days later. I was unconscious when we arrived at our destination.

I was, thankfully, unconscious for the part that came next.

And then there was the recovery period, which is substantial, because, and I think this may be obvious when you think about it, removing someone's brain from their head and keeping the brain alive in a box creates a considerable amount of trauma for the brain.

All told, I was out for eighteen days.

And when I say I was out, I mean that I was *out*. I didn't dream. I didn't dream because I don't think that technically I was sleeping. There's a difference between sleeping and what was happening to me. Sleep is an actual thing your brain does to rest itself and tidy up after a day of stimulation. What was going on with me was something else entirely. If sleep was going for an easy swim in a calm pond, what I was

doing was fighting to surface in the middle of an ocean storm, far from any land at all.

I didn't dream. I think it's probably better that I didn't.

During all this time I surfaced only once—well, once that I remember. I remember feeling like my consciousness was being dragged hard through sludge, and thinking, *I can't feel my legs*.

And then: *I can't feel my anything*. And then falling back down into the sludge.

I did feel something the next time I regained consciousness.

I had, bluntly, the worst fucking headache I had ever had in my life.

I'm trying to think of the best way to describe it. Try this. Imagine a migraine, on top of a hangover, while sitting in a kindergarten of thirty screaming children, who are all taking turns stabbing you in the eye with an ice pick.

Times *six*.

That was the good part of my headache.

It was the sort of headache where the best possible course of action is to lie there motionless and quiet, eyes closed, and pray for death. Which is why I think it took me longer than it should have to figure out a few things.

The first thing was that it was dark in the sort of way that shouldn't be possible.

Go ahead and close your eyes. Do it right now. Is it totally dark?

I just realized you wouldn't have read that last question if in fact you'd just closed your eyes when I asked you to. Look, I told you I wasn't a writer.

Let me try this again: Close your eyes for a minute. Then when you've opened them up again, ask yourself if it was totally dark when you had them closed.

And the answer was, no, it wasn't. If you were in a room or place that had any light in it, some of that light found its way through your

eyelids. If you were in a dark room, reading this on a screen, then you had afterimages of the screen on your retina. And even if you were in a dark room, maybe listening to this being read to you, eventually the very physical fact of your eyes would eventually make something happen. If you rubbed your eyes, you'd press on your optic nerve and ghost images and colors would appear in your brain.

The darkness is never totally and inescapably dark.

But this darkness was.

It wasn't the absence of light. It was the absence of *anything*.

And once I realized that about the darkness, I also realized it about the silence. There's no such thing as perfect silence, either. There's always some noise, even if it's just a phantom hum from the hairs in your cochlea moving around in your head.

There was nothing but the perfect clarity of nothing.

Then I realized I couldn't taste my mouth.

Don't look at me like that, because even though I can't see you I know you're looking at me like that.

Listen. I don't care if you ever *think* about the fact that you can always taste your mouth. You are *always* tasting your mouth. It's where you keep your tongue. Your tongue doesn't have an off switch. You are tasting your mouth *right now,* and now that I've brought it to your attention, you're probably realizing that you should probably brush or chew some gum or something. Because your mouth, by default, is a kind of a little *off,* tastewise.

You can taste your mouth. Even when you're not thinking about it.

I was thinking *very hard* about it. And I couldn't taste a goddamned thing.

And *this* is where I started to lose it. Because you know about blindness. It's a thing that happens to people. They lose their sight and maybe even their eyes, and while it's possible to regrow eyes or to

create artificial ones, you still accept that blindness is real, and maybe it's happened to you. The same with deafness.

But who the *actual fuck* can't taste their own mouth?

So, yeah. This is where my brain well and truly started saying *oh shit oh shit oh shit* on a more or less infinite loop.

Because after that *everything* I wasn't sensing hit me head on: No feeling in my hands or feet or arms or legs or penis or lips. No smells coming in through my nose. No sensation of air going past my nostrils and into my nose. No sense of balance. No sense of heat or cold.

No nervous swallow. No feeling of fear sweat in my pits and on my brow. No racing heart. No heartbeat.

No anything.

I would have positively shit myself in fear, except I had no sense of losing sphincter control, either.

The only thing I could feel was pain, because my headache decided that this was a fantastic time to get a dozen times worse.

And I focused on that headache like a starving dog focuses on a steak *because it was the only thing in the world I could feel.*

And then I passed out. Because I think my brain decided I was feeling too much about not feeling anything.

I can't say that I disagreed with it.

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When I came to again I did not freak out, and I felt a little bit proud about that. Instead, I tried to calmly and rationally figure out what was going on.

First hypothesis: I was dead.

Discarded because that seemed kind of stupid. If I were dead, then yes, I wouldn't be feeling anything. But I also probably wouldn't be aware that I wasn't feeling anything. I just … wouldn't *be*.

Unless this was the afterlife. But I doubted it was. I'm not much of a religious person, but most afterlives that I'd heard of were something

more than a blank nothingness. If God or gods existed, and this was all they put together for eternal life, I wasn't very impressed with their user experience.

So: probably alive.

Which was a start!

Second hypothesis: was in some sort of coma.

This seemed more reasonable, although I didn't really know anything about the medical facts of a coma. I didn't know if people in comas could actually think about things while they were in them. From the outside they didn't seem like they were doing much. Tabled this idea for later thought.

Third hypothesis: not in a coma but for some reason trapped in my body without any sensation.

This seemed like the most reasonable explanation on the surface, but two questions arose that I didn't have answers for. One, how I got into this predicament in the first place. I was conscious and knew who I was, but otherwise my memory of recent events was shaky. I remembered falling out of my bunk and then going to the bridge, but anything after that was a blur.

This suggested to me that I had some sort of event; I knew people's memories of accidents or injury were sometimes wiped out by the trauma of the event itself. That seemed likely here. Whatever it was, I was in a bad way.

Well, that wasn't news. I was a consciousness floating around in nothing. I had gotten the "you're not doing so well" memo.

But that was the second thing: Even if I were in terrible shape, which I assumed I was, I should be able to feel something, or to sense something other than my own thoughts. I couldn't.

Hell, I didn't even have a headache anymore.

"You're awake."

A voice, perfectly audible, indeterminate in terms of any identifying quality, coming from everywhere. I was shocked into immobility, or would have been, if I had any way to be mobile.

"Hello?" I said, or would have, if I had been able to speak, which I wasn't, so nothing happened. I started to go into panic mode, because I was reminded so clearly that there was something wrong with me, and because I was desperate that the voice, whoever it was, would not leave me alone again in the nothing.

"You're trying to talk," the voice said, again from everywhere. "Your brain is trying to send signals to your mouth and tongue. It's not going to work. Think the words instead."

Like this, I thought.

"Yes," the voice said, and I would have cried with relief, if I could cry. A jumble of thoughts and emotions rose up in a panicky need to be expressed. I had to take a minute to calm down and focus on a single coherent thought.

What happened to me? I asked. *Why can't I speak?*

"You can't speak because you don't have a mouth or tongue," the voice said.

Why?

"Because we took them from you."

I don't understand, I thought, after a long minute.

"We took them from you," the voice repeated.

Did something happen to them? Was I in an accident?

"No, they were perfectly fine, and no, you weren't."

I don't understand, I thought again.

"We removed your brain from your body."

It's hard, looking back, to accurately convey the amount of utter incomprehension I was experiencing at this moment. I tried very hard to express my level of confusion and incredulity at the statement I just heard. What came out was:

What

"We removed your brain from your body," the voice repeated.

Why would you do that?

"You don't need them for what we need you to do."

I was still not comprehending well, and absent anything else was numbly carrying on with the conversation, waiting for the whole thing to make the slightest bit of sense to me.

What do you need me to do? I thought.

"Pilot your ship."

I need my mouth for that.

"No you don't."

How will I talk to the rest of the crew?

"There is no other crew."

At this, something surged in my brain—something like a memory, but not an actual memory. A thought that I used to know what had happened to the crew of the *Chandler,* but now I didn't, and that whatever had happened wasn't good.

Where is the rest of the crew, I thought.

"They are dead. All of them."

How?

"We killed them."

My sense of panic was back. I knew this was right, that the voice was telling me the truth. But I couldn't picture how it had happened. I knew I used to know. I desperately *wanted* to know. But there was nothing in my mind that could tell me, nothing but an approaching wall of dread.

Why did you kill them? I thought.

"Because they weren't needed."

You need a crew to run a ship.

"No we don't."

Why not?

"Because we have you."

I can't operate an entire ship by myself.

"You will or you'll die."

I can't even fucking move, I thought, exasperated.

"This will not be a problem."

How do you expect me to pilot and operate an entire ship when I can't even move?

"You are the ship now."

And then suddenly the complete incomprehension was back.

Excuse me? I finally thought.

"You are the ship now," the voice repeated.

I am the ship.

"Yes."

I am the Chandler.

"Yes."

What the fuck does that even mean?

"We have removed your brain from your body," the voice said. "We've integrated your brain with the *Chandler*. The ship is now your body. You will learn how to control your body."

I tried to process what I was being told and failed miserably. I could not imagine a single element of what I was being hit with. I could not imagine being a ship. I couldn't imagine trying to control such a complex machine all on my own.

And if I don't? I thought. *What happens if I can't learn how to control it?*

"Then you will die," the voice said.

I don't understand, I thought, again, and I imagined that the complete helplessness I felt was entirely obvious. Maybe that was the point.

"It's not important for you to understand," the voice said.

To which some part of my brain immediately said, *Fuck you, asshole*. But it didn't appear to have been sent—or at least the voice didn't respond to it. So I said something else to the voice instead.

Why would you do this to me?

"This ship needs a pilot. You are a pilot. You know this ship."

That doesn't require taking my brain out of my goddamned skull, I thought.

"It does."

Why?

"It's not important for you to know."

I disagree!

"It doesn't matter that you disagree."

It matters that I won't pilot the ship. I won't.

"You will or you will die."

I'm already a brain in box, I thought. *I don't care if I die*.

I thought this was an excellent point, until a spasm of pain started.

Remember that headache? That was a twinge compared to this. It felt like my entire body was turned in a seizing electrical cramp, and not even the wonder of feeling like I had a body again distracted me from just how much I hurt.

Objectively, it can't have gone on for more than a few seconds. Subjectively I think I aged a year through it.

It stopped.

"You do not have a body, but your brain does not know that," the voice said. "All the pathways are still there. All the ways that your brain can still make you experience pain are ours to control. It's very simple to do. All the settings are already programmed. If we were so inclined we could run them on a loop. Or we could simply leave you in the dark, deprived of every possible sensation, forever. So, yes. If you will not pilot and operate this ship, then you will die. But before you die you will learn just how far and how long your death can be delayed,

and how much pain you can feel between now and then. And I assure you that you will care."

Who are you? I thought.

"We are the only voice you will hear for the rest of your life, unless you do what we tell you."

Is that the royal we? I thought, not to the voice but to myself. I don't know why the hell I thought that. I think being made to feel like I had a power station's worth of electricity run through my nonexistent body might have made me a little loopy.

The voice didn't respond.

Which was the second time that happened, when I didn't think directly to the voice.

Which was interesting.

What happens if I do what you tell me? I asked, to the voice.

"Then at the end of it you will get your body back. It's a simple exchange. Do what you're told, and you will be you again. Refuse and you will die, in pain."

What is it you want me to do?

"Pilot and operate this ship. We have already told you this."

Where and for what purpose?

"That comes later," the voice said.

What do I do now? I asked.

"Now, you think," the voice said. "You will think about what your choices are, and what the consequences of those choices will be. I will give you a day to think about it, here in the dark. It will be a long day. Good-bye."

Wait, I thought, but the voice was already gone.

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So for the next day I thought.

First thought: Definitely not dead. No need for a religious crisis. One small thing off the list of things to worry about. It was the only

one, but anything would do at this point.

Second thought: Whoever it was who had me had captured my ship, killed my crew, taken my brain out of my body, and now expected me to run the ship entirely on my own, for their own purposes, and would kill me if I didn't.

Third thought: To Hell with these people. There was no way I was going to do anything for them.

In which case they would be more than happy to torture me just for the fun of it. As I knew from experience. Which was an actual consideration I had to take into account.

Fourth thought: Why me?

As in, why did they take me and not someone else? I was third pilot of the *Chandler*. I was literally the newest crew member. They could have picked anyone else from that ship and they would have made a better choice, in terms of knowing the ship, how it works, and what its capabilities were. I was not the obvious choice.

Identify your pilots.

The sentence barreled out of my subconscious and stood in front of me, daring me to give it some sort of context. My memory was still spotty; I knew it had been spoken, but not by whom, or when. I would need to rack my brain to figure it out.

The thing was, I had time.

And in time an image popped into my head: a creature dressed in black, knees going the wrong way, giving the order to Captain Thao and shooting Lee Han when she questioned the order.

A Rraey. The Rraey had taken me. That answered the question of who these people were. But it didn't answer the question of why me. The captain hadn't identified me as a pilot. She hadn't identified anyone as anything. Someone else did that.

Secretary Ocampo.

Suddenly the image of that bastard pointing me out blazed into my consciousness, clear as if I were reliving the moment.

And then all the rest of it came back too—every blank spot in the memory suddenly filled with hard force, almost painfully jammed in.

I had to stop.

I had to stop to grieve for the crew of the *Chandler*. To grieve for the few friends I had made there, and for everyone else who I did not know but who did not deserve to die, just as I did not deserve to live instead of them.

It took some time. But as I said before, I had the time.

I took it.

And then when I was done I started fiddling with the problem again.

Why was I taken? Because Secretary Ocampo knew me. He'd been introduced to me even before we'd gotten to the *Chandler*, we took the shuttle ride over, and I came to him when I had questions about our change of destination.

He knew I was a pilot, but he also knew me as a person—probably the only person he knew on the *Chandler* other than Captain Thao and Vera Briggs.

It's possible he picked me simply because he knew I was a pilot. He knew there were other pilots on the ship—he'd probably seen Bolduc on the bridge—but I was the first that came to mind. Because he'd met me. He knew me. Or thought he did.

So maybe he didn't *just* pick me because I was a pilot. Maybe he picked me because he knew me as more than a random crew member. Maybe he saved me because there was a personal connection there.

And wasn't there? Didn't I feel like I could go to his stateroom and ask him about the orders he'd given the captain? Wasn't he at least a little impressed that I had figured it out?

So, yes. Maybe he picked me because he knew me. Maybe because he liked me. Maybe he even thought he was *saving* me. Maybe he thought he was doing me a favor.

Picking you to have your brain plucked out of your body is not my idea of a favor, some part of my brain said.

Good point, brain, I thought, ignoring that I was now speaking to myself. But the point is not what *I* thought of it, it was what Ocampo thought of it, and me. I wasn't flattering myself that I was important to Ocampo—I thought back to him telling Commander Tvann it was up to him whether or not to tell Vera Briggs to stay out of the lifepods. If Ocampo was like that with his own assistant, who he'd worked with for years, he wasn't going to care much if I got uppity and troublesome.

But until then, there might be something there to work with.

What? And for what purpose?

I didn't know yet.

That wasn't the point. The point was that I was now listing my potential assets. And one of those assets was that Ocampo, for whatever reason, picked me to pilot the *Chandler*—to *become* the *Chandler*.

So that was one thing.

Another possible asset: what Ocampo *didn't* know about me.

He knew my name. He knew my face. He knew I was a pilot.

And … that was it.

Which meant what?

It could mean nothing. Or it could mean that when they hooked me up to the *Chandler*'s systems, they wouldn't know how much I already knew about the systems. Or how to use them.

Don't get too excited, that other part of my brain said. *You're a brain in a box now. And they can see everything you do. They're probably looking at you thinking all this right now.*

You're depressing, I said to that other part of my brain.

At least I'm not talking to myself, it said back. *And anyway you know I'm right.*

It was a fair point. I had to accept that leaving me alone with my thoughts could be part of a test that I was being given, to see how I would respond. If they were able to follow my thoughts right now, I had to accept that they would use that information to decide what to do with me—kill me or torture me or whatever.

But I had a feeling they weren't. I had a feeling that the day alone with my thoughts was for another purpose entirely. It was to dominate me. To terrify me. To remind me how alone I was and how helpless I was. How utterly dependent I was on them now for my survival.

And you know what? They would be right about that. I *was* alone. I *was* dependent on them for survival. I *was* terrified.

But I wasn't going to be dominated.

Yes, I was isolated. Yes, I was scared.

But I was also really, really *pissed off*.

And that was the thing I decided I was going to work with.

If they were listening to me when I was thinking this, they could kill me at any time. In which case they could get on with it, because otherwise they were just wasting my time and theirs.

But I didn't think they were.

I don't think they thought they *had* to.

Which was another possible asset. They assumed they had the upper hand in dealing with me.

Again, fair enough. I was a brain in a box and they could kill me or torture me any time they wanted. That's a pretty good definition of having the upper hand.

But the fact was, they needed me.

They needed a pilot for the *Chandler*. They had me.

And they had *only* me. Everyone else in the crew they had killed off, suffocating them in those lifepods. They were so sure they had the

upper hand with me that they didn't bother with a spare.

Which said to me either they had never done this before, and had no idea what they were doing, or they had done this a lot, and the response by their pilot victims was always the same.

I thought about the Rraey saying that their engineers could repair the ship and get it going again because this was something they were used to. I thought of their efficient way of dealing with the crew, to cow them and get what they wanted.

It was clear this wasn't something they were new to.

They had done this before. And maybe were right now doing it with pilots other than me. They expected the pilots to be desperate and to be willing to do anything to get their bodies back. They were so used to the response they didn't really think any other response was possible.

So no, I didn't think they were listening in on me right then. I didn't think they thought they had to. I could be wrong, but it was an assumption I was willing to go on.

That gave me free time to think. And plan. Another asset that I had. For now, anyway.

Then there was the final asset I had:

I knew I was already dead.

By which I mean I knew that their promise to return me to my body was almost 100 percent certain to be complete bullshit. There was no way that was going to happen.

I knew that because they killed the crew of the *Chandler*. I knew it because of what Ocampo said when I pleaded with him to send the skip drone back to Phoenix Station to save the crew. I knew it because of how they lied to the crew to lead them willingly to their deaths.

They had no intention of putting me back into my body. I was as close to certain as I could be that my body was already gone—

incinerated or tossed into space or put into a stew because the Rraey had a reputation for eating humans when they had the chance.

I thought about my body in a very large pot, simmering.

I actually found it blackly amusing.

Whatever was done with it, my body was history. I was sure of it.

I was also sure that whatever it was that Ocampo and the Rraey—or whatever it was they were working for—wanted me to do, when I was done with it they would flip whatever switch they had and simply murder me then.

That is, if whatever mission they were going to have me do wasn't already a suicide mission. Which I suspected it probably would be. Or at least, they wouldn't lose a lot of sleep if I didn't come back.

I was under no illusion that my fate wasn't the same as that of the rest of the *Chandler*'s crew. It was just a question of when. And the answer of "when" was: when they were done using me for whatever it was they had planned.

Which meant that I had whatever time existed between now and then to, in no particular order, find out who they were (besides Ocampo and a bunch of Rraey soldiers), discover what they had planned, learn how to stop them, and kill the hell out of all of them.

All of them, that is, except Ocampo. If there was some way to bring him back to Colonial Union space, I was going to do it. Because no matter what else, I think they were going to be very interested in whatever it was he was wrapped up in.

And because he didn't deserve to get off as easy as him dying would let him.

You're pretty ambitious for a disembodied brain, that other part of my brain said again.

I've got nothing else to do, I replied. Because it was true. All I had right now were my thoughts, and time. Lots of time.

So I took it.

• • •

At some point I think I slept. It's hard to tell when you have no outside frame of reference to let you know if you're actually asleep.

I do know I didn't dream. I was okay with that.

And at some point the voice came back.

"You have had time to think on your situation," the voice said. "Now it is time to make your decision."

The voice was right: it was time to make my decision.

Not whether or not I would decide to stay alive. I'd already decided that one early on.

What I was deciding now was how to act in front of the voice.

Should I be cowed and afraid? Should I be defiant and rebellious, but still willing to do what they wanted? Should I just remain silent and do only what the voice told me to?

This was an important decision because how I responded to the voice now would establish what our relationship was and possibly what would be allowed me in the future—and what I might be able to get away with.

If I picked the wrong attitude, that would have negative consequences. If I was too complacent maybe they would simply treat me as the machine they made me into. Too rebellious and I'd spend all my spare time getting zapped. Neither was what I wanted, especially getting zapped. Once was enough.

"What is your decision?" the voice asked.

I have questions, I thought, suddenly. Which wasn't how I was expecting to go, but, okay, let's see what happens next.

"Your questions are not relevant," the voice said.

Let me rephrase that, I said. *I'm going to do what you want. I've decided that. But it would help me if I knew a few things as well. I understand I can't force you to answer any questions. But it would help me be helpful to you if you would consider answering them.*

There was an actual pause here. "What are your questions?"

I have three, I said. Which again, was news to me, but I could come up with three questions, right?

And in fact one popped up in my head. *First, do you have a name?*

"Why would that matter?"

Because I feel awkward just thinking of you as "that voice in my head," I thought. *If we are going to be working together it would be nice to have a name for you.*

"You may call me Control," the voice said.

Okay, good, I thought. *Hello, Control.*

Control waited, silent. Well, fine.

Second, would it be possible for me to speak to Secretary Ocampo at some point?

"Why would you need to speak to him?"

I don't need *to speak to him,* I thought. *I have already agreed to help you. But when I was taken off the* Chandler *he told me that he was doing this, whatever this is, to help humanity. I want to talk to him more about that, to understand what he meant.*

"It doesn't matter if you understand," Control said.

I know this, I thought, *and though I know you're under no obligation to care, I disagree. You have my help. But if you had my understanding I might be even more useful. Secretary Ocampo is an admirable man. I respect him. If he's doing this, he must have a reason. I think that reason could make sense to me. I would like to know more about it.*

"We will not let you speak to Secretary Ocampo now," Control said. "But if in your work you do well, we may consider it for the future."

Fair enough, I thought.

"Do not ask us about it again."

Of course not. You've already said you'd think about it. That's enough.

"Your final question."

Will you give me your word that I will get my body back?

"My word," Control said.

Yes, your word, I thought. *Your promise. I already said I would help you. I will. I will do everything you ask me to. You said that if I did I would get my body back. That was the deal. But there are deals, and there are promises. A deal you can make with anyone. A promise is something you make with someone you trust. If you make a promise with me, that means I can trust you. And that means I can stop worrying about whether I can believe you or not. And that means I can do what you ask me to, better.*

And once more there was a pause.

I had a point in asking these questions, even if I didn't know I was doing it when I started.

Information. Trust. Creating intimacy and a relationship.

I'd asked for a name, and while Control wasn't much of a name, it was something. A personalization. Something that made that royal we into an "I." Asking to speak to Ocampo further extended our deal, and turned it from something general—something they probably forced on every pilot whose brain they put into a box—into something specific to me.

And asking for Control's word? More intimacy—making the deal between me and it. Something with reciprocity. Something with trust.

It was also a test.

"You have my word," Control said.

Now I knew everything I needed to know about Control.

And Control had no idea that I knew.

That's all I need, I said. *I'm ready to get started when you are.*

"Then let's begin," Control said.

The *Chandler*'s bridge appeared all around me.

Or, more accurately, a computerized visual representation of the *Chandler*'s bridge; cleaner, plainer, and with all extraneous detail stripped from view.

"You recognize this," Control prompted.

Of course, I thought.

It was the standard bridge simulation program, used for training purposes, configured for the *Chandler*'s bridge setup, which in itself was pretty standard.

I recognized it because like anyone else who ever did time on a bridge, I'd spent a couple hundred hours using it in addition to actual physical training at the specific bridge station.

I also recognized it because I helped to program it.

Or a slightly earlier version of it, anyway. It'd been a few years. This was probably an updated release of it.

That said, a quick glance suggested that not much had changed in the software since I had worked on it. It didn't even look like it was a new major release from what I had worked on. A point release, maybe? With some minor fixes? How does an organization clearly not hooked into the mainstream of Colonial Union commerce even get these programs? I felt vaguely annoyed on behalf of my former employer that this program had clearly been pirated.

Not that I was about to mention to Control that I had worked on the program. Control didn't know because Ocampo didn't know, and I saw no reason to let either know. Control already thought I was stupid enough to believe its word on things. I wasn't going to do anything to dissuade it of that notion.

It's the bridge simulator program, I thought, to Control.

"It used to be a bridge simulator program," Control said. "And for now, it will continue to be so. But we've adapted it to control the

Chandler. Ultimately you will be able to control all the ship systems from inside of it."

How will I do that? I asked. *The simulator program is designed as a virtual space but tracks actual hand and body movements. I'm missing both*.

"Here," Control said, and I was in a virtual body. My view was clearly meant to be from head height; by thinking about it I could move it on a swivel, like I had an actual neck. I looked down and a stripped-down, visual representation of a human body was there. I imagined moving my hands and my hands came up from my sides, palms toward me, featureless where there should have been palm lines and fingerprints.

I nearly had a breakdown right then, I was so grateful. Even a fake body like this was better than no body at all.

Even so …

Some part of my brain—I think maybe the same part that argued with me earlier—was going *Really? That's* it*?*

I knew what it meant. It meant that these assholes had taken my brain out of my body to run the *Chandler,* and I had to run the *Chandler* all on my own, and the way they intended me to run the *Chandler* was with a simulation of a human body I no longer had.

Which seemed, I don't know. *Inefficient*. If you're going to take the time to get rid of my body, then *maybe* take the time to create a control metaphor that takes advantage of not being limited to a human body anymore.

They didn't take you out of your body for efficiency's sake, said that part of my brain. Well, yeah, I figured *that* out a while back. It was about fear and control.

But *still*. Kind of a waste of effort.

I pulled myself back together (metaphorically), and looked around the simulated bridge.

Are you coming onto the bridge with me? I asked Control.

"No," it said. "Please go to the captain's chair."

I nodded. The captain's chair had a screen where she could look at the information from all the stations, either at once or one at a time. Captain Thao, like most captains, tended to take reports from her bridge crew, who were better at boiling down the information into what she needed to know immediately. But she could get all the information from the screen if she wanted to boil it down herself. Which meant that I could, too.

Likewise, the captain could control the ship from the screen if she wanted, rather than giving orders. Very few captains did, because things got complicated fast, and besides, if you want to make your bridge crew unhappy, the best way to do it was to try to do their job for them. The fact is that no captain was competent at every bridge station. Most didn't try to be.

Except now I would have to be.

I sat in the virtual captain's chair and pulled up the captain's screen.

I'm ready, I thought to Control.

The virtual captain's screen lit up, and all the department windows opened in a grid. Tapping twice on one of the windows would cause it to expand to full screen and become fully interactive. Only one department screen could be full screen at one time but you could also chain full-size department screens together and swipe through them to access them quickly. It was all pretty basic except for the fact that I would be responsible for monitoring and dealing with all of them.

I looked further at the captain's start grid.

Some of these are blank, I said.

"Some of the ship functions you no longer need to control," Control said. "You will be the only living thing on the ship and your living area is tightly sealed and controlled by us, so you will not need life-support controls. Likewise communications. We control those and

several other ship-related functions. Others, such as engineering, you need to control only on a limited basis, and the maintenance of those functions will now be handled by us. The only ship's functions you need to concern yourself with are navigation, weapons, and propulsion, including skipping."

That makes things simple, at least, I thought to Control. I made the windows for navigation, propulsion, and weapons full-sized and chained them together.

I'm ready, I sent.

"We're sending you a simulated mission now," Control said. "It is a simple one, focused primarily on navigation. Let's begin."

• • •

Ten hours of simulation that first day, at least by the simulation clock, almost all of it dead simple navigation that as a pilot I could do in my sleep. I had a suspicion that the simulations were not specifically chosen for me by Control, but might have been simply on a list of simulations to run that it was running through.

It was boring.

But it was also manageable. There was nothing that first day that I wasn't able to do. The piloting, like most piloting, was about feeding information into the computer and then dealing with anything unusual that might go wrong. Nothing went wrong with any of these initial simulations.

The most difficult thing I had to do was slide the simulated *Chandler* out of the way of a chunk of rock floating out in space. I considered using the simulated *Chandler*'s lasers to vaporize it—it was small enough—but I figured that wasn't what the simulation was about yet, and anyway vaporizing it ran the risk of creating a bunch of even tinier bits of rock, harder to track, that some other ship would then ram into. Most ships could handle a micrometeor impact, but why create a problem for someone else when you didn't have to?

So I moved the *Chandler* out of the way, logged the rock's present location and direction, and then would have simulated sending a data packet to nearby ships, except that I was not in charge of ship's communications. So instead I made a notation to have the data sent to other ships at the earliest opportunity.

If Control were noting any of this, I didn't know about it. Control was entirely silent for that entire simulation, and the other runs we ran that day. "You will be controlling the ship alone," Control said, when I asked it about the silence, between runs. "You will not have us nor any other person to communicate with once you begin your missions. You need to get used to the silence."

You're not worried about boredom? I asked. *Human minds need a little stimulation outside of monitoring navigation systems.*

"This has not been a problem before," Control said. Which is how I learned for sure that I was not the first person they had done this to.

I thought about other people in the same predicament and would have shuddered if I could.

It also suggested to me that I might not even be the only person currently in my situation. That Control, whoever it was, might also be running simulations with other people and ships, even as it was working with me. It would be something I would need to find out, eventually.

"We're done for the day," Control eventually said. "We will continue again tomorrow."

How many hours will that be? I asked. I didn't know if Control was human, and wherever we were was almost certainly not a human outpost, so I had no idea of how long a day would be.

"About twelve hours from now," Control said, after a minute. I think it may have had to look up what "hours" were to make the conversion.

What do I do now? I asked.

"Whatever you like," Control said.

I'd like to go jogging, I thought.

Control didn't say anything to that. I was getting the idea that Control, whoever it was, did not have a particularly good sense of humor.

What is *there for me to do?* I asked.

"If you like, you may reload today's simulations, and run them again," Control said. "In fact, I suggest it."

Is there anything else? I asked. *Anything to read? Anything to watch? Anything to listen to?*

"No," Control said.

May I request some form of entertainment? I asked. *Anything would be good. If I only have navigation simulations, I think my effectiveness will eventually decrease.*

"If it decreases too far then you'll be punished," Control said. "If it decreases after that you will be killed."

Well, that's motivation of a sort, I thought to Control.

Control didn't respond. I suspected Control had left the simulation.

You need to get used to the silence, I thought to myself, repeating Control's words from earlier in the day. Well, I was getting used to it whether I liked it or not.

I looked down at the simulated captain's chair and at the captain's screen, on which a small menu tab appeared, with the day's missions. I could reload them if I liked.

Instead I got up and ran around the simulated bridge, doing laps. Then I did some push-ups and lunges and sit-ups.

I want to be clear I was under no impression that what I was doing constituted actual exercise. I couldn't feel my simulated body; even the double taps and swipes I made during the day were numbly done. I wasn't doing it to keep my body in shape. I didn't have a body to have a shape.

I did it because it was something else to do besides what Control wanted me to do. Something I wanted to do on my own time. My way of exercising my own control. If you want to put it that way.

It even kind of worked. Eventually I got tired. I lay down on the simulated floor to go to sleep.

And discovered I didn't have simulated eyelids.

It didn't matter. I was asleep fast enough anyway.

This time I knew I had slept.

• • •

Two days later I broke the bridge simulation and escaped. Sort of.

It happened after hours, once Control had gone off for the night, or what I assumed was night, anyway. I was running one of the day's previous simulations, this one requiring me to navigate the *Chandler* into a docking position at a space station. It's the sort of maneuver that I'd done dozens if not hundreds of times, both simulated and real. There was no challenge to it whatsoever.

So I did what anyone doing a simulated run does when they're bored and there's no penalty for misbehavior:

I started wrecking things.

First I rammed the space station with the *Chandler,* because I was interested, purely for the science, how realistic the impact would be in terms of the simulation's rendering of classical physics.

Answer: not bad. I had limited control of outside sensors, so I saw both the *Chandler* and the space station crumple nicely, with appropriate bursts of metal and glass due to explosive decompression as the *Chandler* plowed through the station. My sensors did not indicate the *Chandler*'s engines overloading, however, which would have created a nice bit of mayhem.

So I ran the simulation again, this time giving the *Chandler* enough distance to make for some impressive acceleration before I hit the space station.

This time the *Chandler* exploded. All my control windows flashed red before blanking out, never a positive sign for the structural integrity of the ship. The simulation did not detail either economic or human losses, but I doubt anyone in the station sections I hit, or the *Chandler* crew, would have survived.

The Chandler *crew didn't survive already,* that other part of my brain said.

I ignored it.

The next run-through I was curious what would happen if I attacked the station. The simulations I'd run didn't require me to operate any of the weaponry systems, so while Control was around I hadn't bothered with them.

But I had control of them anyway, and they were fully operational, so. In the next simulation I launched three missiles at the station, just to see what would happen.

A minute later my damage sensors went bright red as ten missiles from the station struck the *Chandler* at various critical spots, taking out weapons, engines, crew compartments, and outside sensors. About a second after that my screens went blank, because in this simulation the *Chandler* had just been turned into an expanding cloud of debris.

Well, that was rude, I thought, and would have smiled if I could.

Several more simulations after that, attacking the space station, then attacking other ships at the station, firing at shuttles, basically any combination of tactics that involved surprising someone with a missile. All the simulations ended pretty much the same way: the *Chandler* being turned into a missile pincushion.

All right, fine, let's try this, I thought, and ran the simulation again.

This time I didn't ram the station, or fire on it. I just slid the *Chandler* into docking position, and waited until the simulation gave me the "victory condition" signal—the signal that I had done what the simulation required of me.

Then I launched a barrage of missiles at the space station, aiming specifically for its weapon systems, the ones I could see visually, but also the ones I couldn't, going off the data I had of the space station. I timed the missiles so they would impact all the weapons systems at the same time.

Which they did. And then, while everything was blowing up nicely, I opened up the throttles on the engines and headed straight into the mess.

And as the *Chandler* made first contact with the skin of the space station, something happened.

Everything went black.

Not just the captain's screens, which would have indicated that the *Chandler* had been destroyed. No, *everything* went black. There was the simulation, and then, for several full seconds, there it wasn't.

I spent those several seconds in the complete blackness wondering what the hell had just happened.

Then the bridge simulation popped up again around me.

I knew what had just happened: I'd crashed the simulator.

And then, I'm not going to lie to you—my brain just went *off*.

Here is the thing about that bridge simulator: The bridge simulator was now my whole world. I lived in it, running simulations, and nothing else. I couldn't leave it—I was in it, but I didn't have any control over it other than being able to run the simulations Control gave me to run. I couldn't step outside of the simulation, or close it out, or mess with the code in any way. I was trapped in it. It was my prison.

But when I crashed the simulator, it booted me out. For a few seconds there, *I* was somewhere else.

Where else?

Well, what happens when a program crashes? You get booted back into the system the program runs on.

Not literally *in* the system; my consciousness hadn't been sucked into a computer or anything. That's stupid. My consciousness was in my brain, like it always was.

But before, my senses had been dropped into the bridge simulation. Everything I could see or sense was inside of it. For those few seconds when the simulator crashed, I was somewhere else. The system the simulator ran on.

I wasn't seeing anything, and then the bridge simulation popped up again, which said to me that the bridge simulator crashing wasn't entirely unheard of. Control (or whomever) had set up a restart routine to go directly back into the bridge simulator, without giving the pilot any time to figure out what was going on, or to see the computer interface he or she was working within.

But that didn't necessarily mean the pilot was completely locked out of the system.

I launched the docking simulation again.

If Control knew the program crashed, then that meant it knew where the bugs were—or knew where some of them were. So either it knew where they were and did nothing about them other than relaunching the system directly back into the simulator, or it did something about it and tried to patch the code—and in the process possibly created new bugs when the new code interacted poorly with the old code.

Control wouldn't know anything about the new bugs unless they glitched during a run it was watching. And no one would do what I just did while Control was watching because Control would probably electrocute them for farting around.

So: Control didn't know that *this* glitch was there.

But some glitches are transient and not reproducible. Those are the hardest as a programmer to fix.

I ran the simulation exactly as I had before to see if the glitch would replicate in the same way.

It did.

So I ran it a third time.

And this time, when the program crashed, I thought about the commands that, when the system we programmed the bridge simulator on was booted up, would open the diagnostics and modification screens for the system.

I thought about them *really hard*.

And two seconds later, there they were.

The diagnostics and modifications screens. Ugly and utilitarian, just like they have been since the very beginnings of visual user interface.

They were beautiful.

They meant that I was into the system.

More specifically, I was into the *Chandler*'s system.

Well, a little, anyway.

This would be the part of the story where, if this were a video piece, the heroic hacker would spew a couple of lines of magical code and everything would open up to him.

The bad news for me was that this was very much not my personal situation. I'm not a heroic hacker with magic code. I was a brain in a box.

But I *am* a programmer. Or was. And I knew the system. I knew the software.

And I had a plan. And a little bit of time before anyone was going to bother me again.

So I got to work.

* * *

I'm not going to bore you with the details of what I did. If you're a programmer and you know the system and the hardware, and the code,

then what I did would be really cool and endlessly fascinating and we could have a seminar about it, and about system security, and how any system fundamentally falls prey to the belief that all variables are accounted for, when in fact the only variables accounted for are the ones you know about, or more accurately that you *think* you know about.

The rest of you would have your eyes glaze over and pray for death.

I assume that's most of you.

So for the rest of you, what you need to know:

First, the work, the first part of it anyway, took more than a single night.

It actually took a couple of weeks. And during all that time I waited for the moment where Control, or whoever, looked at the *Chandler*'s system and found evidence of me wandering around in it, making changes and trying to get into places where I shouldn't. I waited for the moment they found it, and the moment they decided to punish me for it.

But they didn't.

I'm not going to lie. Part of me was *annoyed* that they didn't.

Because that's some lax security. *All* of it was lax. When whoever it is took over the *Chandler,* they left the system wide open, with only the basic level of security that would have been outmoded right at the beginning of the computer era. Either they were so sure that they didn't need to worry about security where they were—everyone could be trusted and no one would try to screw with things—or they were just idiots.

Maybe both! The level of insecurity was actually offensive.

But it worked to my advantage, and without it I would probably be dead, so I shouldn't really complain.

Those first two weeks were the scariest for me because what I was doing was pretty much out in the open. I tried to hide what I was doing

as well as I could, but someone who was looking could have found it. If Control or anyone else looked into my extracurricular sessions, they would have seen me running one particular simulation the same way over and over and could have seen what I was doing.

It meant that if during the simulations where Control was watching, if the program crashed, it might code a patch, and that patch could affect the bug I was using to exit the program. Which meant I would be trapped again.

I was very very *very* careful in the simulations Control watched. Never did anything rash, never did anything not by the book.

The irony of doing things exactly as they wanted me to, so they wouldn't find out the things they might torture or kill me for, was not lost on me.

Those two weeks were, literally, the worst two weeks of my life. I already knew that whoever it was that had me was planning to kill me after I did what they wanted of me. But even knowing that didn't ease any of the stress of messing with the code. Of knowing I was exposed if anyone decided to look, and yet doing it anyway.

It's one thing to know you're already dead. It's another to work on something that might give you a chance to stay alive, as long as no one decides to look.

They never looked. Never. Because they didn't think they had to.

I was so grateful for it.

And at the same time, so contemptuous of it.

They deserved what I was going to do to them. Whatever it was. I hadn't figured it out yet.

But when I did: no sympathy.

• • •

What I did with those two weeks: blue pill.

No, I don't know where the phrase comes from. It's been used for a long time. Look it up.

But what it means is that I created an overlay for the *Chandler*'s computer system. A just about exact replica.

I copied it, tweaked it, attached everything coming in from the outside to it, as well as the bridge simulator. It looked like, responded like, and would control things like the actual computer system for the *Chandler*.

But it wasn't.

That system, the one that actually ran the *Chandler,* was running underneath the copy. And that one, well.

That one, I was totally in control of. The reality underneath the simulation. The reality that no one but me knew existed below the simulation. The simulation that everyone thought reflected reality.

That's the blue pill.

For the next month, every day, all day, I ran more and more complex missions on the bridge simulator. More simulations where I had to juggle navigation with weapons.

It was clear to me that whatever they were training me for, it had a significant military component. They were expecting me to go to battle for them. They may or may not have expected me to survive the battle. I think "not survive" was the more likely scenario.

This was not a surprise.

Through this all, I kept up the chatter with Control. To engage it. To make it feel something for me. To make it see the person it had put into a box.

I was not notably successful.

But I wasn't expecting to be.

What I had to be was the *same* person Control thought I was. The one who had decided to help. The one who had decided to trust Control.

I didn't want to mess that up. I wanted Control and anyone else listening to get exactly what they were expecting. I wanted them to be

as smug about their small-c control over me as they ever were.

They did not disappoint.

And while they were thinking that, when Control left me alone after a day of simulations, I had free run of the *Chandler*.

Which, as it turned out, was undergoing some drastic renovations. Notably, having the actual weapons systems reinstalled. Before it had been the *Chandler,* the ship had been a Colonial Defense Forces frigate. When it was decommissioned those weapons systems were removed and dismantled.

Now systems were being put back into place. The ship was crawling with workers inside and out. I hadn't been aware of them before, because why would I be? I was a brain in a box, trapped in a simulation.

But *now* I could see, and hear, everything that was going on with the ship.

The workers were not mostly human. Most of them, as far as I could tell, were Rraey, just like the soldiers who attacked the *Chandler* in the first place.

Every now and then, however, a single human would show up on the ship, and advise or direct the weapons installation. It was always the same human.

She was not Ocampo. Or Vera Briggs, his assistant. This was someone entirely new. Whatever was going on, from the human side, there was more than Ocampo involved.

Watching the workers installing the weapons systems, I realized I had gotten lucky. In a couple more weeks, they'd be done with their installation and then the weapons systems would be plugged into *Chandler*'s computer system. If the work had been done earlier, or I had started my work later, I would have been found out. There was a small window, and I had plopped into it.

Which made me feel like the luckiest guy in the universe, until I remembered I was still a brain in a box.

Which brings me to the other thing I found on the *Chandler*:

Me.

I was on the bridge, in a large rectangular box that looked, for all the world, like a coffin. The top of the box was clear; from my vantage point of the bridge cameras, I could look straight down into it and see: my brain.

And the electronic elements that were attached to it, to the surface of the gray matter and, I assumed, inside of it as well. I could see the hard wires snaking out of it, toward a juncture on the side of the box.

I saw the liquid in which my brain was suspended, discolored, slightly pink. I saw tubes connected to my brain, I assume taking in and bringing out blood or something substituting for it. Something that brought in nutrients and oxygen, and took out waste. The tubes also snaked out to a juncture in the box's interior wall.

A change in camera and in perspective and I saw another box, into which the wires and tubes went. It's this box I saw two Rraey, who I assume were doctors, come to and open daily, doing diagnostic work. Inside were filtering systems, intake and sampling valves, hardwired computers to monitor my brain's well-being, and something else that I couldn't identify at first, until one of the Rraey accidentally jostled it, and the other yelled at it for doing so.

The *Chandler*'s system has within it a translation library for several hundred known species. It, like most such libraries on trade ships, almost never gets used because we're mostly dealing with humans. Nevertheless it's there and on hand for when or if you need to translate anything. It translated what the second Rraey said to the first.

"Keep that up," it said. "You'll blow up all three of us."

"Then at least our remains would get to go back home," the first Rraey said.

“I would prefer to go back home in a form that would allow me to enjoy it,” the second Rraey said, and then inserted a dongle into one of the hardwired monitors, I assume to check on how my brain was doing and make adjustments.

I imagine the information showed that at that very moment I had a spike of anxious brain activity.

Because of the bomb.

On top of everything else, they had a bomb attached to me.

In case I was at all concerned that they ever had any intention of letting me get out of this alive.

In case I was thinking I was really going to escape this hell.

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PART THREE

"You have performed well in simulation," Control said one day, more than three months after I had first woken up to find myself a disembodied brain.

Thank you, I thought. *I have been trying to live up to my end of our deal.*

"You have been," Control said. "You may find it useful to know that you have become one of our best pilots, in terms of hitting training performance goals."

Well, of course I was. It was because I was very careful to perform simulations exactly to spec, so the software wouldn't glitch and they would have to root about in the system to fix it. The blue pill system I made was pretty solid, but why tempt fate.

The other reason was that when Control wasn't paying attention I was watching videos and listening to music that had been in the *Chandler*'s entertainment library. Which helped to keep me sane instead of dwelling on my complete and utter isolation from the rest of humanity. It's not exactly surprising that staying sane is useful when trying to hit performance markers.

None of which I expressed, or even thought, while Control was around.

By now I had some understanding of why Control only "heard" what I thought directly to it—the brain-reading software recognized intentional attempts at communication and filtered that away from the constant low-grade babbling and monologuing every brain does all the time, in order to optimize communication. The software kept the thoughts I meant to myself internal—but if you remember how many times in your life you unintentionally said something out loud you meant to keep quiet, and made a mess of your life for a day because of it, then you'll know why I tried to keep my mind blank when Control was around.

I'm happy to know that, I thought. And then waited, like I always did.

"You have done well enough that we have agreed to your request," Control said.

My request?

"You asked if you could speak to Secretary Ocampo at some point," Control said. "We have arranged for you to speak."

Is he coming to visit me? I asked.

"In a manner of speaking," Control said. "We have arranged for a feed to be ported through to this simulation."

So, not on the *Chandler* itself. Well, that was just fine. *Will that be today?* I asked.

"No. We have work to do today. But soon."

Thank you, I thought. *I am grateful.* And that was certainly true, as far as it went.

"You're welcome," Control said. "Let's begin today's simulations."

When will you have an actual mission for me?

"Why do you ask?"

You have been training me all this time. I've been doing well, as you said. I'm ready for missions.

"You want to fulfill your obligations to us," Control said.

I do.

"In order to regain your body."

I would be lying if I said that wasn't a big part of it, I thought. Which was also true as far as it went.

"I don't have any information for you," Control said. "You will get a mission when we decide the time is right. It is not the right time yet."

I understand, I thought. *I am just anxious.*

"Don't be," Control said. "You will be busy soon enough." And then it opened up a simulation in which I was fighting three Colonial Union frigates at the same time.

It was one I had done before, with some variation. The goal wasn't to destroy all the frigates. The goal was to make them expend as much of their firepower on me as possible so that when three *other* ships skipped in to attack them, they wouldn't have the defenses to survive.

Basically I was bait in the scenario.

It wasn't the only scenario that I'd been bait for, recently.

Let's just say I wasn't loving the pattern of the simulations I was seeing.

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The communications window on my captain's screen, normally dead as the famous doornail, lit up. I put the feed inside of it onto the virtual bridge's largest monitor.

On the feed, as advertised, was Secretary Ocampo.

"Mr. Daquin, are you there?" he asked. He was looking into his PDA camera, inside what looked like a stateroom even smaller than the one he had on the *Chandler*.

I am, I thought.

"Okay, good," Ocampo said. "I only have an audio feed for you. They didn't give me a video feed for some—" He stopped here abruptly. He had just realized that the reason he didn't have a video

feed was because there wasn't a body for him to look at, just an exposed brain in a clear box.

But *I* had a video feed, so I could see a flush rising through Ocampo's features. He had at least enough grace to be ashamed of himself for forgetting what he had gotten me into.

It's all right, I thought. *I just wanted to talk anyway. If that's all right. If you have time.*

"Today is a religious observance day for the Rraey who run this outpost," Ocampo said. "So nothing's going on today. It's why I'm able to speak to you at all."

Hooray for Rraey Christmas, I thought, to Ocampo.

He smiled at this. "So, what's on your mind?" he asked. And then I got to see another flush rise through his face as he realized just how inappropriate that particular phrase might be to me. This time, at least, he didn't try to run from it.

"Jesus, Rafe," he said. "Sorry about that."

It's all right, I assured him.

"I'm not sure why you even wanted to speak to me," Ocampo said. "If I were in your shoes—*fuck*."

Okay, if I could laugh, I would definitely be laughing right now.

"I'm glad one of us would be," Ocampo said. "My point is I don't know why you want to speak to me. I assumed that given what has happened to you, you would never want to speak with me again. That you would be furious."

I was *furious,* I admitted, which was 100 percent true. *I can't say I'm happy even now with the situation I'm in. You know what they did to me. To my body.*

"Yes."

That's nothing to be happy about. But I remember what you said to me the last time I saw you. Do you remember?

"Not really," Ocampo said. "I, uh." He paused. "There was a lot going on that day," he said.

You said that you had to ask where your loyalties were, to the Colonial Union or to humanity. You said there was a difference between the two.

"All right. Yes. I remember that now."

I want to know what you meant by that, I thought to him. *Because while neither you nor I can change what's happened to me, maybe there's something you can tell me that makes sense of it all. So I don't think I've lost my body and my freedom for nothing.*

Ocampo was quiet at this for a moment, and I was content to let him take his time.

"You understand there is a lot that I can't tell you," he said, finally. "That much of what I'm doing now is classified. That my colleagues could be listening in to this conversation so that it wouldn't be safe to share anything confidential with you, and that even if they weren't listening in that I wouldn't share it anyway, because that's the nature of things."

I understand that, I thought. *Secretary Ocampo, I know what my role is. "Mine is not to ask why, mine is to do or die."*

Ocampo blinked, and then smiled. "You're quoting Tennyson to me," he said.

Misquoting him, more likely, but yes. What I'm saying is that I'm not asking about the tactics and strategy, sir. I'm asking about the philosophy. Surely that's something you can talk about.

"I can," Ocampo said, and then, jokingly, "but how much time do you have?"

I have all the time you want to give me, I thought, and let that just sit there, between us.

And then Ocampo started talking. Talking about humanity, and about the Colonial Union. He gave me a brief history of the Colonial

Union, and about how its first encounters with intelligent alien species—all of which went badly for the Colonial Union, and almost destroyed the young political system—permanently marked it as aggressive and warlike and paranoid.

He talked about the decision to sequester away the planet Earth, to intentionally slow its political and technological progress in order to make it essentially a farm for colonists and soldiers, and how that gave the Colonial Union the raw human resources it needed to become a power among intelligent species far more quickly than any of the other species expected, or could deal with.

He explained how the Conclave, the union of hundreds of intelligent species, was formed in part *because* of the Colonial Union—how its leader, General Tarsem Gau, realized that more than any other species or government, the Colonial Union had a template that would eventually lead to domination of the local space—and to the genocide, intentional or otherwise, of other intelligent species. That creating the Conclave was the only solution: that the Colonial Union would either be absorbed into the Conclave as one voice among many, or counteracted because the Conclave would be too large for the Colonial Union to take on.

He explained how this was a great idea in theory—but in reality the Colonial Union had nearly destroyed the Conclave once, and only General Gau's personal decision to spare the Colonial Union kept all the species of the Conclave from falling on it like a train bearing down on a rodent on its track. He explained that once Gau was gone, the Colonial Union was a target—and all of humanity with it.

And he explained—only generally, only in vague terms—how he, a few trusted allies, and a few alien races who were presumed to be enemies of humanity but were in fact merely enemies of the Colonial Union thought there was a way to save humans as a species even if the Colonial Union should fall. And by "should" it was understood what

was meant was "would," and that, in fact, the Colonial Union wouldn't so much fall as be pushed, and in a particular direction.

All of this Ocampo expounded, with himself in the role as a reluctant catalyst or fulcrum for history, someone who wished it were not necessary to give the Colonial Union that push, but one who, recognizing it was necessary, nevertheless stood up—regretfully, yes; heroically, *perhaps?*—to administer the push, in the service of the species.

In short: what an asshole.

Which is not what I said.

Which is not what I even came close to allowing myself to think at the time.

What I said and what I was thinking during all this were variations of one simple phrase, that phrase being *do go on*.

I wanted him to talk, and talk, and then talk some more.

Not because he was the first human I had spoken to since that day on the *Chandler*. I didn't like him that much, although of course I didn't want him to know that.

I wanted him to think I was interested and curious in what he had to say, and thought as well of him as I could under the circumstances.

I wanted him to think I thought his thoughts were golden. Pure nuggets of humble wisdom. *Do go on*.

I wanted him to think this because while he was talking to me, he was connected to the *Chandler*. His PDA, more specifically, was connected to the *Chandler*.

And while he was talking to me, I was going through and copying into the *Chandler*'s storage every single file he had on his PDA.

Because here was my problem: No matter what sort of free run I had with the *Chandler*'s system, I was trapped there.

I couldn't get into the system that Control used to connect to the *Chandler*. Someone would notice that the *Chandler* was trying to

address the system. They could log every request. And they would eventually figure out who was doing that. And then I would be screwed.

Besides that, whatever system there was would be entirely alien. I had suspected and Ocampo unwittingly confirmed that wherever we were, it was someplace controlled and run by the Rraey. I knew nothing about Rraey computing systems, or their design, or their programming languages. There was likely to be a computing shell of some sort in which human-designed operating systems could run, and some software that could port documents created on either side to the other.

But full access to the system? That wasn't going to happen. I didn't have the time or resources to get up to speed if it did, and I would be found out and probably tortured and then maybe killed if I tried.

Ocampo's PDA, on the other hand. I knew *all about* that software and hardware.

Official Colonial Union PDAs were manufactured by lots of different companies but all had to run the same software. They all had to be able to talk to every other PDA, and any computers the Colonial Union used for official business. When you have that level of standardization across a government spanning trillions of miles, every *other* computer, operating system, or piece of technology is either standardized to it, or is able to communicate with it.

Oh, I *knew* Ocampo's PDA, all right. Once he opened that connection to the *Chandler*, I knew how to access it, how to look around it, and how to extract files.

And I knew how to do it without him knowing.

Not that I expected him to know; he didn't exactly have the "programmer" look to him, if you know what I mean. He'd be the programmer's boss. The one they hated. The one who made them work on holidays.

I also knew that Ocampo would have all sorts of interesting files on his PDA. Because simply put, where else would he have them? That's the computing and storage unit that he left the *Chandler* with. He would be even less familiar with Rraey technology than I would be. Makes sense that he would keep it, and that he would keep his own information on it. I remembered the exchange Ocampo had with Tvann about Vera Briggs. That poor woman was kept in the dark about a lot of things. Ocampo was used to keeping his own counsel about his business.

The longer I kept Ocampo talking, the more I could find out about his business.

Not that I was trying to sort through any of it while he was talking to me. I had to stay attentive and keep him talking. If I gave any indication he was boring me figuratively out of my skull then he'd drop the connection.

So I kept him talking and had a program make a copy of his PDA. All of it, right down to the communication program he was using to talk to me. I could sort out all of the data later, including the encrypted files.

All of which, it turned out, were keyed to the PDA, so opening them in a virtual copy of the PDA would open the files just fine.

Sloppy.

Three cheers for sloppiness.

The entire copying process took just a little under two hours. I kept Ocampo talking the whole time. It required very little prompting.

Ever heard of "monologuing"? The thing where the captured hero escapes death by getting the villain to talk just long enough to break free?

Well, this wasn't that, because I was still a brain in a box and likely to die the first time I was sent on a mission. But it was something close. And Ocampo had no problem talking and then talking some more.

I don't think it was sheer megalomania, or, if I wanted to be nice about it, him taking pity on the guy he'd caused to be turned into a naked brain. I don't know how many other humans there were where we were; I only knew of Ocampo, Vera Briggs, and whoever the woman was who helped supervise reimplanting weapons systems on the *Chandler*. Of the other two, the weapons systems supervisor looked sort of busy whenever I saw her. As for Vera Briggs, I imagine at this point she might not be feeling especially friendly toward Ocampo.

In other words, I think Ocampo just plain might have been lonely for human contact.

Which I could understand. I had been lonely too.

The difference being, of course, that one of us had made the *choice* to be lonely. The other one of us rather unexpectedly had the choice thrust upon him.

As it turns out, Ocampo's desire to monologue lasted about fifteen minutes longer than the time I needed it to. I knew he was done when he said "But I must be boring you" to me, which is narcissist-speak for "Now I'm bored."

You're not boring me, I thought at him. *But I understand how much of your time I've already taken up today. I can't really ask for more of it. Thank you, Secretary Ocampo*.

"Of course," he said, and then his face got a look. I thought it resembled what the face of someone who felt guilty about something, but didn't actually want to be troubled by doing anything to deal with that guilt, might look like.

I waited and eventually I think Ocampo's vestigial sense of moral obligation kicked in.

"Look, Daquin, I know I've put you in a bad spot," he said. "I know they've promised to return your body to you, and I know they will. They've done this before. But between now and then, if there's

something I can do for you, well…" He trailed off here, letting me imply that he'd be willing to do something for me, without actually saying it, which I think he thought would give him an out.

This guy was a treasure, this Assistant Secretary of State Tyson Ocampo.

Thank you, sir, I thought. *I can't think of anything I need from you right now.* On the monitor, I could see Ocampo visibly relax; I had just let him off the hook. Which gave me the space to say what I really wanted to. *But there is one thing you can do for me in the future.*

"Name it," Ocampo said.

Someday soon they will give me a mission. My first real mission, not the simulated ones they've been having me running. It would mean a lot to me if, on that day, you and Vera Briggs came to see me off.

"You mean, there on the *Chandler*."

Yes, sir. I realize that to some extent, in my condition—and that was an intentional knife thrust to the guilt centers of Ocampo's brain, right there—*it wouldn't matter whether you said good-bye inside of the* Chandler *or outside of it. But it would mean a lot to me. You and Ms. Briggs are the only people I know now. I'd like someone to see me off. Just a couple of minutes here before I go. If you would.*

Ocampo thought about it for a minute, which was either him figuring out the logistics or trying to see if he could get out of it. "All right," he then said. "We'll do it."

You promise? I asked. Because this was the guy who just trailed off on "If there's something I can do for you."

"I promise," Ocampo said, and I believed him.

Thank you, Secretary Ocampo, I said. *You're a good man.*

Ocampo either smiled or winced at that.

Either way, then he waved and cut the signal.

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Things I learned from Ocampo's PDA:

One, there was no doubt Ocampo had known he was going away. He stocked himself quite a library of entertainments—several thousand videos ranging from classic movies from Earth to the latest serials from Phoenix, an equal number of books and musical tracks, and a fair sampling of video games, although these were mostly a decade or more old; I guess when you're running the universe, you don't have time to keep up with everything.

Oh, and *mountains* of porn.

Look, no judgment. Like I said, it's clear he knew he was going to be away for a long time, and probably without significant human companionship. I'm not going to say I wouldn't do the same thing in his shoes. I'm just saying there was more of it than any other sort of entertainment.

And yes, I looked at some. I may be a brain in a box, but that saying that the biggest sex organ is the mind? In my case, both literally and figuratively true.

Also I was curious to see if lack of gonads meant lack of response.

The answer: definitely not. Which was more of a relief than you might think.

Anyway, I might have just gone on about porn too long.

The point was: Ocampo planned for the long term.

Also in the PDA: a truly impressive amount of confidential information from the Colonial Union.

To begin, all the information I think there might have been on the Colonial Union's military capabilities—not just the general Colonial Defense Forces but also its Special Forces and its capabilities. Information on ships, their capabilities, and their state of readiness.

Information about the manpower of the Colonial Defense Forces, its fatality rate over the years, and information about how the lack of relationship with Earth was having an impact on CDF readiness—after

all, if you can't get new soldiers, every soldier you lose becomes one less soldier you can muster.

Detailed files on the civilian arm of the Colonial Union government with particular emphasis on the Department of State, which made sense considering who Ocampo was, but every aspect of the CU bureaucracy was gone over in what looked like exhausting detail (I did a lot of skimming).

Information on the Colonial Union merchant fleet—the thousands of trade and cargo ships that crossed between the planets—including which ones were purpose-built and which ones were repurposed from CDF ships, and their most recent trade routes.

Briefs on the current relationship between the Colonial Union and every known nonhuman intelligent species, as well as the Conclave as a political entity, and the Earth.

Briefs on every single Colonial Union planet, population, defensive capabilities, and a list of targets that would offer maximum damage, either to population, to infrastructure, or to industrial capacity.

Blueprints and assessments of Phoenix Station, the seat of the Colonial Union government and humanity's single largest spaceport.

In other words: just about every single bit of information you would want to have in order to plan an attack on the Colonial Union and make it stick. Or at least what *I* thought you would need. I'm not an expert. But that's what it looked like to me.

Now, not all this information was classified. Some of this information you could get just from looking at an encyclopedia or public records. Ocampo or anyone else using this information wasn't exactly going to have the ability to just access a local data network. Ocampo brought with him everything he'd need—or thought he'd need.

But then there was the rest of it.

The *new* information.

The data Ocampo was given since he got here—*here,* incidentally, being a military base hollowed out of an asteroid, made and run by the Rraey until some recent tangles with the Colonial Union and some others made them scale way, way back—and information he'd created since he'd been here.

With this group.

With the Equilibrium.

Which is what they were calling themselves, anyway.

I thought it was a stupid name. But they weren't giving me a vote. And if they did I would probably name it "The League of Assholes," so I don't think they would mind not having my input.

This new information included audio and video recordings of meetings and the automatic transcriptions of the same. Those were useful because they tagged who was saying what. This was useful because some of the people in the meetings were from species I'd never encountered before—a fact that was not especially impressive since most of my travel was within the Colonial Union, but still something to deal with.

Most of the transcriptions were of meetings about unexciting things—discussions about the maintenance of the base, for one, which apparently had a mold problem that was aggravating the respiratory systems of several of the species there, to which I thought, *Well*, *good*.

But then I found some interesting transcripts after all.

For example: one recorded only a couple of weeks into our stay at the base, which started off with Ku Tlea Dho, a Rraey diplomat, catching Ocampo not paying attention.

"You seem distracted, Secretary Ocampo," Dho said. The video had him down the arc of the table that dominated a tiny meeting room, which had a dozen people in it, most from different races.

"I'm still getting my bearings on the station, Ambassador Dho," Ocampo said.

"You will be here for a while, Secretary," Dho said. "You will have time."

Ocampo smiled here. "Hopefully not too much more time."

"How do you mean?" asked Ake Bae. He was an Eyr. The Eyr were members of the Conclave, or so I learned when I checked the files Ocampo brought with him. Increasingly unhappily members of the Conclave.

"The time has come to discuss the endgame," Ocampo said, to the room. "*Our* endgame."

"Has it."

"It's why I am here, Ake Bae," Ocampo said.

"Indeed," said Ake Bae. "Are you sure, Secretary Ocampo, that you're not confusing your own endgame with *our* endgame? I understand that you are now in exile from the Colonial Union for the duration of the campaign at the very least. That does not imply that Equilibrium must now change its schedule to accommodate your personal needs or inclinations."

Ocampo smiled again, but not exactly a nice smile. "I understand the concern," he said, looking around the room. "I know very well that many of you have the view that humans, individually and as a species, have an outsized opinion of our importance to events, both in general and here with our particular activity. I'm also aware that many of you are of the opinion that I've always been a pain in the ass."

There were noises in the room that I assumed equated to laughter.

"Let me remind you, however, that the roots of this rebellion of ours come from when we, the Colonial Union, struck out against the Conclave at Roanoke," Ocampo continued. He looked around the room at the assembled species. "How many of your governments watched the Conclave form, and felt helpless to do anything about it?" He looked at Ake Bae. "How many of your governments joined the Conclave rather than fight it? The Colonial Union—humanity—were

the only ones to bloody the Conclave. The only ones to show they *could* be bloodied. The only ones to show that General Gau's experiment with hegemony could be toppled."

"You seem to be discounting the attempted coup of Gau after Roanoke," Ake Bae said.

"A coup given impetus by the Colonial Union's attack on the Conclave fleet," Ocampo countered. "My point, Ake Bae, is that we are here today because of what humans have done. If we have a high opinion of our importance to this cause of ours, it's because we've earned it. It's not merely ego."

"There's irony in praising the Colonial Union's actions against the Conclave when it's that very action that convinced us all that it must be destroyed along with the Conclave," said Utur Nove. Nove was from Elpri. I had no idea until that moment that a planet named Elpri even existed.

"We all agree that the return to an equilibrium of power is best for all of our species," Ocampo said. "Thus the very name of our organization. The Conclave represents the primary threat to that equilibrium. We agree about that. We also agree that the Colonial Union grew too powerful in opposition to the Conclave. But don't confuse the Colonial Union with humanity."

He nodded to Paola Gaddis, who was the other human I'd seen, the one who supervised the installation of the weapons systems. She nodded back at him.

"My colleague here represents the interests of several governments of Earth," Ocampo said. "She will be happy to tell you all the ways those governments are not even remotely concerned about the Colonial Union's interests. In the end, the Colonial Union is not humanity. It is merely a government. When the Colonial Union falls, and it will, then the Earth might finally take up the mantle of leading the former worlds

of the CU. Or those worlds might form other unions. *Humanity* will survive. Humanity will continue as part of the new equilibrium."

"Humanity, perhaps," Ake Bae said. "But I was speaking of *you* in particular, Secretary Ocampo. You and your own endgame, which is different from that of the Equilibrium."

Ocampo smiled again, picked up his PDA from the table. The video feed got momentarily wavy, trying to stabilize the image while being lifted. "You know what this is, Ake Bae."

"It's a personal data assistant, I believe," Ake Bae said.

"It is," Ocampo said. "And it contains nearly all of the last decade of data from the Colonial Union State Department and the Colonial Defense Forces. Nearly every confidential file and report on the CU's doings and conflicts. Everything they don't want known, or would want swept under the carpet. Every double-cross of an ally, completed or intended. Every military action on one of its own worlds. Every assassination. Every 'disappearance.' All of it true. All of it verifiable. All of it hugely damaging to the Colonial Union."

"The data you promised us to help us plan our strategy for our next phase," Ake Bae said.

"No," Ocampo said. "Not the next phase. The *last* phase." He shook the PDA for emphasis, and the video got woozy again. "Understand that every piece of data from the Colonial Union is accurate and verifiable. It all happened. And so it will serve as cover for what I will *add* to it."

"What will you add?" asked Dho.

"All of *our* operations," Ocampo said. "Every ship we've commandeered, human and Conclave. Every agitation we've spearheaded on Colonial Union and Conclave worlds. Every attack, up to and including the destruction of Earth Station. All of it altered, to make it look as if it happened under the aegis of the Colonial Union

and the Colonial Defense forces. All verified by both my security hash and the security hash of my former boss, the current secretary of state."

"And how did you get that?" asked Paola Gaddis.

"The weakest part of any security and verification scheme is the people who use it," Ocampo said.

Right then I nearly paused the video to savor the rich irony of that statement, all things considered.

"And the fact they trust the people they've known for years as friends and allies," Ocampo continued, oblivious to my scorn. "Secretary Galeano is no pushover, but she has a soft spot for loyalty. I earned her trust long ago. I've never done anything that would cause her to doubt it."

"Except this," Gaddis pointed to the PDA. "And everything else you've done for Equilibrium."

"I'm not going to suggest Galeano will ever forgive me," Ocampo said. "She won't. I like to think that in time she'll recognize the necessity."

"She won't," Gaddis said. Ocampo shrugged.

"This does not explain why this would be the *last* phase," Ake Bae said, bringing the discussion back around. "It just makes the Colonial Union culpable for our actions."

"No," Gaddis said, before Ocampo could speak. "The Earth already believes the Colonial Union made the attack on Earth Station, to cripple us and to keep us dependent. Getting confirmation would mean a state of war between us."

"Which would force the hand of the Conclave," Ocampo said.

"Right," Gaddis said. "Right now it's playing nice with Earth but still keeping us at arm's length because it doesn't want to antagonize the Colonial Union. But if the CU's verifiably responsible for the destruction of Earth Station, as shown by its own documents, it all falls by the wayside. The Conclave will invite the Earth to join."

"Which will antagonize those of us who don't want the humans in the Conclave," said Utur Nove. "No offense," he said, to Gaddis.

"None taken," she said. "And that's what we want, anyway. The division will weaken the Conclave, just as the Colonial Union decides that it's a material threat and moves to destroy it."

"A move which would fail," Nove said.

Ocampo shook his head. "The Colonial Union will fail if it goes toe-to-toe with the Conclave, yes," he said. "But it wouldn't do that. It *didn't* do it when it destroyed the Conclave fleet at Roanoke. It didn't send its ships into combat with the Conclave's. It sent *assassins*—Special Forces to sneak up and place antimatter bombs on each ship, and then detonate them all at the same time. It was a psychological blow as much as a physical loss. That's how the CU did it. That's how it would do it again. One assassin, one shot—total destruction. Which is how it will happen this time."

"You plan to assassinate General Gau!" Nove exclaimed, following Ocampo's implication.

"No," Ocampo said, and pointed to Nove. "*You* are going to plan it." He pointed at Ake Bae. "Or *you* are going to plan it. You two are both in rather better positions to make it happen. Whoever does it is not my particular concern. The point is whichever of you plans it, it will become obvious that you did it at the behest of the Colonial Union. The CU knows that humiliating Gau nearly brought the end of the Colonial Union. It knows that Gau requires loyalty to *him,* not the Colonial Union. Killing him destroys that loyalty. Killing him destroys the Conclave."

"Which leaves the Colonial Union the largest power standing," Ake Bae said.

"No," Gaddis said. "Not without the Earth. No soldiers. No colonists."

"Unless the Earth changes its mind," said Ku Tlea Dhu.

"At the right time, we will motivate them otherwise," Ocampo said. "We've done it before. We can be equally persuasive this time." He motioned away from the room, toward, I guessed, the docks in which the *Chandler* was being worked on and equipped. "Unless you've got a better use for all the ships we've been taking."

"A thing which is getting harder to do," Dhu said. "We can't trick all the ship captains as you did with the *Chandler*'s."

"All the more reason to bring things to an active conclusion," Ocampo said. "We've always been a small but potent unit. Small isn't the problem. The potency of our actions is the key."

"And all this begins by releasing the information on that," Ake Bae said, pointing to the PDA.

"Yes," Ocampo said.

"And where do you suggest we release it?"

"We release it everywhere," Ocampo said. "Everywhere, all at once."

"I think this is a good plan," Gaddis said. "I even think we have a chance of making it work as we intend to."

"It's nice the two humans are in agreement," Nove said. I noted that sarcasm was a near-universal trait of intelligent species.

"With respect, Ambassador Nove, our agreement is a good thing," Gaddis said. "Don't forget that through all of this, it's *my* planet that is the most vulnerable. We lack spaceships. We lack military power. The governments I represent believe Equilibrium offers us the best chance to build up our defenses before everyone else turns their attention to us again. This plan can make that happen." Nove shifted its weight, unhappy.

Gaddis turned her attention back to Ocampo. "Which isn't to say it doesn't have risks. Principal among them being that the Colonial Union has to believe you are dead. And died loyal. If they think you're alive and a traitor, you know they won't stop looking for you."

Ocampo nodded. "The Colonial Union knows what it means when a ship is taken," he said. "They know everyone but the pilot is killed. They won't think it will be any different for me."

"You are an undersecretary of the State Department," Nove pointed out.

"On vacation," Ocampo said. "Nothing to identify me as anything other than an unlucky civilian."

"You don't think they will suspect you," Gaddis said.

"I've been part of this for several years now," Ocampo said. "I've been funneling information to Equilibrium all this time. If they were going to catch me they would have done it before I left."

"You had people you used," Thu said.

"I had a small number of people who operated independently and subcontracted," Ocampo said. "I cleaned up before I left."

"You mean you had them killed," Thu said.

"The ones who could bring things back to me, yes."

"And *that* won't look suspicious at all," Gaddis said, archly.

"Give me a little credit for subtlety," Ocampo said.

"All this talk," Ake Bae said. "All this planning, all this strategizing, and yet we still don't know your endgame, Secretary Ocampo."

"It's the same as the endgame for Equilibrium," he said. "The end of the Conclave. The end of the Colonial Union. The end to superpowers in our little corner of space. And when it's all said and done, our group, which acts in the shadows, fades into them forever. And we go back to our worlds."

"Yes, but *you're* dead," Ake Bae said. "Or at least the Colonial Union thinks so. And it is in your—and our—interest for them to continue to believe so."

"For now," Ocampo said.

"And later?" Ake Bae asked.

"Later things will be very different," Ocampo said.

"You don't think this will be a problem."

"I don't."

"And you're sure about this."

"Nothing is ever certain," Ocampo said. "But to go back to earlier points in this conversation, after what I've done for this group of ours, and for our goals, I think I've earned some confidence for my opinions. And my opinion is: No. When all is said and done, this won't be a problem at all."

And then they started talking about the mold problem some more.

I came away from this with two thoughts.

One, and again: Ocampo was a real piece of work.

Two, that sob story he told me about humanity and the Colonial Union was a load of crap.

Scratch that—not *entirely* a load of crap. What he told me was the nice version. The version where he was a selfless martyr for humanity rather than the guy who was planting a bomb in order to profit from the chaos. I had no love for that Ake Bae character, but he or she or it was not wrong. Whatever Ocampo was up to, he was in it for himself as much as, if not more so, than he was for anyone or anything else.

And then there was the third thought: Ocampo's megalomania, or whatever it was, had already gotten thousands of people killed.

Not *only* his megalomania. He wasn't working alone. But he sure seemed to be doing some of the heavy lifting.

And soon, they would want to use me to do more of it.

• • •

And then, like that, it was time.

"We are giving you a mission," Control said, one morning, or at least during the time of day that I'd been thinking of as morning since I got to the Equilibrium base.

Okay, I thought to Control. *That's good news. What's the mission?*

"We will provide you with a mission brief once you're near the skip point."

So two or three days from now, I thought.

"Sooner than that," Control said. "More along the line of eight of your hours."

That was an interesting admission. Skip drives, which are how we travel immense distances in space, only engage when space-time is flat enough—that is to say, far away from a gravity well.

By telling me the rough amount of time it would take to get to skip distance, Control was telling me something about where we were. That the base was someplace that had a low mass, not especially close to anything more massive, like a planet or moon.

Basically Control was telling me we were at an asteroid, at a far distance from its star.

Which I *knew,* but which Control didn't know I knew. Control never told me.

By telling me now, either Control slipped, or didn't think it mattered.

Since I knew Control had done this before many times, it didn't seem likely it was a slip. So Control figured it didn't matter. And I figured it didn't matter because either they thought I was well conditioned to respond like they told me, or they didn't plan on me surviving the mission.

I thought about my armaments—a couple dozen missiles and beefed-up beam systems, perfect for blinding communication systems and incoming missiles. And then I thought about my defensive systems, which hadn't been substantially upgraded from when the *Chandler* was a trade ship.

So, yeah. I was betting on the "not coming back" scenario.

All right, I thought. *It would at least be helpful to know the general sort of mission it is, however. So I might practice some simulations on the*

way.

"That won't be necessary," Control said. "We prefer you to stay focused on the mission once it starts."

Understood, I said. *Does this mean I'll have control of the ship to skip distance?*

"No," Control said. "We will control the *Chandler* for the disembarkation and for a short portion of time thereafter. After which a course will be set. You will have full control after the skip. Until then you are to monitor systems. We will keep a communication channel open so you may alert us if there are any problems."

The further I get from you the longer the lag will be in our communication, I pointed out. *The speed of light still applies*.

"We don't anticipate any problems," Control said.

You're the boss, I thought. *When do we start?*

"Secretary Ocampo has asked us to delay the start of your mission until he can say good-bye to you," Control said. "As was your request."

Yes.

"As a courtesy to him, we will allow this. He is currently otherwise engaged. When he's done, he will travel to you. You will have ten of your minutes to say your farewells. This will happen within the next two hours."

Understood. Thank you, Control. It means a lot to me.

Control didn't say anything to this; I could see that it had broken its connection. That was fine.

I had a couple of hours to prepare for my mission.

I prepared.

• • •

"I remember the last time I was here," Ocampo said.

He was standing on the bridge of the *Chandler*. With him were Vera Briggs and an escort of two Rraey soldiers.

I imagine it looks a little different now, I thought to him. *A bit emptier.*

Ocampo visibly winced at this; I could see it happen through one of the bridge cameras. Vera Briggs was silent and staring, in a horrified fashion, at the box containing my brain. The Rraey, for their part, were unreadable to me. That's the thing about aliens, I suppose.

Thank you for coming to see me, I thought, to both Ocampo and Briggs. *I really appreciate it.*

"You're welcome," Ocampo said. "To be honest it's nice to be off that rock—"

One of the Rraey made a throat-clearing sound here, suggesting some nonverbal cues were universal; that is, if you have a throat.

"—it's nice to have a change of scenery, I should say." Ocampo fairly glared at the Rraey.

I don't want to take up too much of your time, I thought. *I know the two of you are busy. Also, Control told me that I had ten minutes with you.*

"Right," Ocampo said. "And in fact we should probably start on our way back. They were annoyed with us enough when I insisted we say good-bye."

I understand, I replied. *And I think I need to get started anyway.*

From outside the bridge came a loud clanging noise, followed by what sounded like voices. It might have been the *Chandler*'s intercom speakers acting up. Or it could have been something else.

Both Ocampo and Briggs jumped. The two Rraey said something to each other in their own language and hoisted their weapons. One of them held a hand out to Ocampo and Briggs, signaling that they were to stay on the bridge. The Rraey then exited the bridge to investigate.

The automatic, reinforced door to the bridge slammed shut, sealing Ocampo and Briggs in and the Rraey out.

"What the hell?" Ocampo asked.

There was a low thrumming sound as the *Chandler*'s engines ramped up from their resting phase to propulsion phase.

"What are you doing?" Ocampo asked me.

I'm not doing anything, I replied. *I don't have control over the ship yet.*

There was a banging on the bridge door. The Rraey were trying to get back in.

"Open the door," Ocampo said to me.

I don't have control of the door.

"Who does?"

Whoever it is that has been running my simulations. I don't know who they are. They just told me to call them Control.

Ocampo swore and pulled out his PDA. Then he swore again when he couldn't open up a line back to base. When the PDA got to the *Chandler,* it automatically connected to the ship's network. The *Chandler*'s network gave every appearance of being down.

Ocampo looked around at the bridge stations. "Which of these is for communications?"

None of them are right now, I thought at him. *The bridge stations are cut out of the command loop. Everything gets routed through a simulated bridge which I'm supposed to control.*

"So you *are* in control of this ship!"

No, I said "supposed to," I pointed out. *I'm not in control of the ship yet. I only get control once the ship has skipped. It's Control who is behind this.*

"Then talk to Control!" Ocampo yelled.

I can't. I've never been given the ability to contact them. I have to wait for them to contact me.

And lo and behold, guess who suddenly came onto the line.

"The *Chandler* is moving," Control said. "Explain how."

I don't know, I thought. *You're the one in control of this ship.* You *tell* me.

"I'm not in control of the ship."

Well, someone is.

"It has to be you."

How can that be? I exclaimed. *Check it yourself! I'm not doing a damn thing in the simulation!*

There was a brief pause here as Control ascertained that, indeed, inside the simulation I was doing nothing. While this was happening the banging at the bridge door became more insistent and it sounded like fists were being replaced by weapon butts.

Then Control's voice came over the bridge speakers. "Secretary Ocampo," it said.

"Yes?"

"You are controlling the *Chandler* in some way."

"The hell I am," Ocampo said.

"You've sequestered yourself in the bridge," Control said.

"We're locked in here, you asshole," Ocampo said. "And I can't help but notice that my Rraey escort is on the other side of the door. What are you up to?"

"Please cease your actions."

"I am not doing a goddamned thing!" Ocampo yelled. He motioned to the bridge stations. "These fucking things don't work! It's you who is doing this!"

There was a pause; Ocampo looked confused. It took him maybe a second or two longer to realize that the hammering on the door had stopped while he was yelling at Control.

"You have purged all the air everywhere but the bridge," Control said, after a minute. "You have just killed two Rraey."

"Jesus Christ," Ocampo said, clearly exasperated. "*It's not me!* I'm not in control of this ship! You are! You are the one who is doing this!

You're the murderer, not me! Why are you doing this?"

"Enough," Control said. By this time I could see on my simulated sensors that the *Chandler* had completed its disembarkation process and was beginning to accelerate away from Equilibrium base. This would be the point where Control would have no choice but to cut its losses and try to either disable or destroy the *Chandler*. I was curious to find out what would happen next.

What happened next was that a ping hit my personal set of sensors. It was a signal that was meant for the bomb, nestled next to my brain in my box.

It was supposed to detonate the bomb, killing me.

What it did instead was launch a dozen missiles from the *Chandler*.

Let's just say I had a philosophical disagreement with the whole "blow up my brain" strategy. And this was my editorial comment on that plan.

I think I actually heard a squawk of surprise from Control as those dozen missiles popped up on its sensors.

There were three ships aside from the *Chandler* docked at Equilibrium station: one a refurbished Colonial Union frigate like the *Chandler,* one that looked like a purpose-built trade ship to me, and one of a design I didn't recognize, so probably an alien ship. I imagined that all three of them were like the *Chandler,* currently being repurposed for whatever asshole plan Equilibrium had up its sleeve for each of them.

I tasked a missile to each ship.

If those ships had crews on station, it's possible that they could have stopped the missiles. But if all they had were brains in boxes, not given control of their own ships, then they were sitting ducks.

Each of those missiles hit home, crippling but not entirely destroying the ships.

Intentional on my part. If there were other brains in boxes in those ships, they didn't deserve to die at my hand.

They didn't deserve any of the horror that happened to them.

Six missiles aimed for Equilibrium base's weapon arrays, because I didn't want them to have a chance to mess up my getaway with a well-placed missile, or two, or ten.

One missile homed in on the Equilibrium base energy generator, because I figured if they were worried about things getting dark and cold, they would have less time to worry about little old me, or the *Chandler*.

One missile went to the base communication array, to make it more difficult to get the word out. They'd undoubtedly try to launch some skip drones, but I'd already configured my beam weapons to burn those out before they got anywhere close to skip distance. Factoring in tracking lag from the speed of light would be tricky. But I'd had time to practice.

That left one missile.

That one went to my best guess as to where Control was.

Because fuck that guy.

Yes, you could say that I'd been busy, using the *Chandler*'s outside cameras to scope out the base, and double-checking the information with the data I had taken from Ocampo's PDA.

I knew I was going to have one chance to get it right. Any misses and everything suddenly became a lot more complicated.

Fortunately I still had a couple dozen missiles left.

But as it turns out I didn't need them. When I launched the missiles I was still really close in to Equilibrium base. The targets had anywhere from ten to twenty-five seconds to respond. Which might have been enough in a battle situation.

But as a surprise? When the base and ships were unprepared for attack and the only person who could have raised the alarm was being

kept busy with an argument with the very confused and increasingly hostile Secretary Ocampo?

Nope. Not enough time.

Every missile hit its mark.

The resulting chaos was glorious to me.

Glorious.

"Hello?" Ocampo said, and I realized that from his point of view, nothing had happened. He was still waiting for a response from Control.

I'm sorry, Secretary Ocampo, I thought at him. *Control isn't likely to respond to you at this point.*

"Why not?"

Because I just stuffed a missile down its fucking gullet, that's why.

"What?"

I just attacked Equilibrium's base, I thought at him. *Twelve missiles, all in the right places. It's going to keep them busy while the three of us get to skip distance*.

"What?" Ocampo said again. He clearly wasn't getting it.

"You mean we're going back?" Vera Briggs said. "Back home? Back to the Colonial Union?" It was, honestly, the first time I remember her speaking a complete sentence.

Yes, I said. *That's the plan. Back to Phoenix Station. Where I think they will be very interested in what Secretary Ocampo has to say for himself.*

"You can't do that," Ocampo said.

Take you back to the Colonial Union? I asked. *Yes I can. Yes I will. In fact, that's what I was waiting to do.*

"I don't understand," Ocampo said.

I've had control of the Chandler *for weeks. I could have tried for an escape long before now. But I needed your data to take back. And I needed* you *to back it up. You're going home, Secretary Ocampo.*

"You don't understand what you're doing," Ocampo said.

Sure I do.

"No, you don't," Ocampo said. "Don't you understand that what we're doing here is saving humanity—"

Everything after that point was cut short by the *whoofing* sound Ocampo made as Vera Briggs walked the couple of feet separating the two of them and kneed her boss square and hard in the balls.

I don't even have balls anymore and *I* felt that.

Ocampo collapsed, groaning. Briggs kicked him several more times in the ribs and face, inexpertly but enthusiastically, until he stopped doing anything but lying there in a ball.

"Motherfucker," Briggs said, finally backing away.

You didn't kill him, did you? I asked.

"Trust me, I'm going to make *sure* he lives," Briggs said. She spat on him; he didn't even flinch. "Make me look like a fool by perpetrating treason behind my back? For *years*? Kill a ship full of people and give me the choice of death or being kidnapped? Make me an accomplice to killing even more people? No, Mr. Daquin. This asshole lives. And I'm going to make sure the Colonial Union knows everything I know, too. So you just get us back. You get us back. I promise you I'm going to take care of the rest of it. And *you,*" Briggs said to Ocampo. "You so much as *move an inch* between now and then and you're going to wish I kicked you to death. You understand me, *sir*?"

Ocampo didn't move a muscle for the entire rest of the trip.

• • •

"Let's talk about the future," Harry Wilson said to me.

It had been a busy week.

I had skipped the *Chandler* into existence roughly ten klicks from Phoenix Station itself, setting off every single proximity warning the station had. Which was the point; I didn't want them to miss me.

As soon as I skipped I started broadcasting that I had Secretary Ocampo *and* critical information about an alien attack, which got everyone's attention. Less than an hour after that the *Chandler* was swarming with Colonial Defense Forces, Ocampo and Briggs were taken off the ship—Ocampo to the infirmary of Phoenix Station's detention facility and Briggs to high-level debriefing—and then the CDF tried to figure out what to do with me.

That's when Wilson showed up.

"Why you?" I asked him—*asked* him, because he connected directly to me with his BrainPal, the computer inside his head.

"Because I've done this before," he said. He explained that later, during his debriefing of me, during which I told him of my experiences and gave him all the information I had.

"The future," I said, back in the present.

"Yes," Wilson said.

"What I want for the future is to have a body."

"You're going to get that," Wilson said. "We're already working on it. The Colonial Defense Forces have already authorized growing a clone for you."

"You're going to put my brain in a clone?"

"Not exactly," Wilson said. "When the clone is grown we're going to transfer your consciousness into it. You'll leave this brain behind and be put into a new one."

"That's … unsettling," I said. My brain was the only part of me left, and now they were telling me that I was going to leave it behind.

"I know," Wilson said. "If it helps, I've been through the process. You're still you after it happens. Promise."

"When can we start?" I asked.

"Well, that's up to you," Wilson said. "That's what I want to talk to you about."

"What do you mean?"

"They've already started working on your body," Wilson said. "If you wanted it—and no one would say anything against you wanting it—we can get you one in a few weeks. But for someone with an already existing consciousness that we need to port into the new brain, it's not optimal. They'd rather build your body slowly and pre-prime the new brain to accept your consciousness. That way the transfer goes off without a hitch."

"How long will that take?"

"Less time than making a body the natural way, but still a few months," Wilson said. "Honestly the longer we take prepping the body for consciousness the better it will be."

"And in the meantime I'm stuck here on the *Chandler*."

"'Stuck' is a relative term," Wilson said.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that if you want, I might have a job for you. And the *Chandler*."

"What's the job?"

"The job is to be you. Both you, Rafe Daquin, and you, the brain running the *Chandler*. We want the various species we talk with to be aware that you're real and that your story is real."

"I already gave you all the information I have on Equilibrium," I said. "It's pretty convincing."

"*We* don't need to be convinced," Wilson said. "*We* know you're telling the truth. But you understand that us knowing about Equilibrium—us knowing that they were the ones behind the attack on Earth Station and the ones who have been setting the Conclave and the CU against each other—isn't enough. Thanks to what Equilibrium has already done, the CU has almost no credibility. With anyone. Not with independent species. Not with the Conclave, or any species within it. And certainly not with Earth."

"And having me around changes that?"

"Well, no," Wilson admitted. I would have smiled at this if I could. "It doesn't change it. But it does get our foot in the door. It offers others at least the possibility that we might be telling the truth. You can get us a hearing, at least."

"What about the Equilibrium base?" I asked. "You sent ships there?"

"I'm not supposed to tell you anything about that," Wilson said.

"Are you kidding me?"

"Relax. You didn't let me finish. I'm not supposed to tell you anything about that. Specifically, I'm not supposed to tell you that we found the base and we found a lot of fresh damage that corresponds to what you told me, but aside from that the base was deserted."

"What do you mean deserted?" I said. "When did you get there?"

"We sent probes almost as soon as we got coordinates from you, and a couple of warships right after that."

"Then you should have found *something*. They couldn't have disappeared."

"I didn't say *disappeared,*" Wilson said. "I said deserted. There was a lot of evidence of someone having been there, and of the base having been used up until very recently. But whoever was there was gone. They left in a big damn hurry."

"What about the other ships?" I asked. "The ones like me, I mean."

"We found wreckage," Wilson said. "Whether they were the ships like you or some other ships we can't tell you yet."

"They wouldn't have been able to go anywhere," I said. "If you found wreckage, it was those ships."

"I'm sorry, Rafe."

"I don't understand how they could have deserted the base that quickly. I knocked out their communications."

"There's the possibility that they had drones or ships in other systems set to investigate *if* there was no communication with the

base," Wilson said. "These assholes were building a fleet with hostage pilots. They probably figured one of them might try an attack or lead someone back to them sooner or later."

"But *I* got away. If they planned for it, how did *that* happen?"

Wilson grinned. "Maybe you were better at it than they expected. They had to decide between evacuating their people or going after you."

"But we still have all the evidence. You have Ocampo, for God's sake! Have *him* talk."

"He's not going to be talking to anyone other than CDF intelligence for a while," Wilson said. "More to the point, he doesn't really have the capability to talk to anyone else at the moment."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that right now, you and he have a lot in common," Wilson said.

It took me a second to figure out what *that* meant. Then I imagined Ocampo in his own little box.

"I don't know how I feel about that," I said, eventually.

"I think you should probably feel disgusted by it, but that's just me," Wilson said. "I wasn't in charge of that decision. Look, Rafe, you're right. We have all the facts. We have names. We have data. And when and if people choose to look at all that *rationally,* then they'll realize that the Colonial Union isn't to blame for a lot of the crap it's currently getting the blame for. But until that time, being able to have you around to appeal to their emotions and sense of morality doesn't hurt. We could use you."

"To evoke pity."

"Yes," Wilson said. "Among other things. Also, we kind of need a ship."

I thought about this. "For how long?" I asked.

"Hopefully not too long," Wilson said. "Things are moving fast now. We're already a week behind. We've sent back-channel messages to the Conclave and are arranging meetings now. We're trying the same with Earth. In both cases things are complicated by the fact that some of their people are involved too. And meanwhile Equilibrium is still out there. And you've probably accelerated their schedule. Everything's going to get done very soon, I expect."

"And if it all works out, then my body is waiting for me."

"Even if it doesn't work out your body will be waiting for you," Wilson said. "Although in that case you may have less time to enjoy it than you'd want."

"Let me think about it," I said.

"Of course," Wilson said. "If you can give me an answer in a couple of days that would be good."

"I will."

"Also, if you say yes, then we'll be working together," Wilson said. "You and me and Hart Schmidt. Who is worried about you and quietly furious that he's not allowed to talk to you yet and that I can't tell him anything. Let me suggest that you let him in to see you as soon as that's cleared from above."

"I will," I said again.

"You also need to tell us whether you want us to tell your parents about you yet," Wilson said, gently.

This was something I had been waffling about. I was alive. But I didn't think my family would be comforted by how I was right now.

"They still think I was lost with the rest of the crew," I asked.

"Yes," Wilson said. "We found lifepods and are retrieving the bodies and notifying the families. There was one lifepod that was destroyed. As you know. We can always say to your parents that some bodies haven't been found. Which happens to be true, as far as it goes."

"I'll tell you what to do when I give you my other answer," I said.

“Fair enough.” Wilson stood up. “One last thing. The State Department asked me to ask you if you’d do a write-up of your experience. A personal history.”

“You’ve already debriefed me.”

“I did,” Wilson agreed. “I got all the facts. I think they’re wanting to know everything else, too. You’re not the only person they’ve done this to, Rafe. I know that for a fact. At the end of this we’re going to have to put other people back together too. You telling us what it’s been like for you might help with that.”

“I’m not a writer,” I said.

“You don’t need to be,” Wilson said. “We’ll get someone to clean it up so it scans. Just talk the whole thing through. We’ll figure it out from there.”

“Okay,” I said.

And that’s what I did.

And that’s what this is.

The life of the mind.

Well, my mind, anyway.

So far.

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THIS HOLLOW UNION

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To William Dufris and Tavia Gilbert, and any other audiobook narrator who might work in the Old Man's War universe. Thanks for giving these characters a voice.

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PART ONE

"I have to tell you that I am deeply concerned that our union is on the verge of collapse," Ristin Lause said to me.

It's been said, and I suspect largely by people who are not terribly fond of me, that I, Hafte Sorvalh, am the second most powerful person in the known universe. It's certainly true that I am the confidant and closest advisor of General Tarsem Gau, the leader of the Conclave, the largest known political union, with over four hundred constituent member species, none of whom number less than one billion souls. It is also true that in my role as confidant and advisor to Tarsem, I have a great deal of choice in terms of which things to bring to his attention; also that Tarsem chooses to use me strategically to solve a number of problems he would prefer not to be seen involved with, and in those cases I have a wide amount of personal discretion in solving the problem, with the full resources of the Conclave at my disposal.

So yes, it would not be inaccurate to say that I am, indeed, the second most powerful person in the known universe.

Note well, however, that being the second most powerful person in the universe is very much like being the second most of anything, which is to say, not the first, and receiving none of the benefits of being the first. And as my position and status derive entirely from the grace and need of the actual most powerful person in the universe, my ability

to exercise the prerogatives of my power are, shall we say, constrained. And now you know why it is said of me by the people who are not terribly fond of me.

However, this suits my personal inclinations. I don't mind having the power that is given to me, but I have only rarely grasped for it myself. My position has come largely from being usefully competent to others, each more powerful than the next. I have always been the one who stands behind, the one who counts heads, the one who offers advice.

And, also, the one who has to sit in meetings with anxious politicians, listening to them wring whatever appendages they wring about The End of All Things. In this case, Ristin Lause, the chancellor of the Grand Assembly of the Conclave, an august political body that I was always aware of having a grammatical redundancy in its title, but nevertheless not to be ignored. Ristin Lause sat in my office, staring up at me, for I am tall, even for a Lalan. She held in her hand a cup of iet, a hot drink from her planet, which was a traditional morning pick-me-up. She had it in her hand because I offered it, as was customary, and because she was, at a very early time on the clock, my first meeting for the sur, the Conclave's standard day.

"In truth, Ristin, are you ever *not* concerned that our union is on the verge of collapse?" I asked, and reached for my own cup, which was not filled with iet, which to me tasted like what might happen if you let a dead animal ferment in a jug of water in hot sunlight for an unfortunately long period of time.

Lause made a head movement which I knew corresponded to a frown. "You are mocking my concern, Councilor?" she asked.

"Not at all," I said. "I am offering tribute to your conscientiousness as chancellor. No one knows the assembly better than you, and no one is more aware of the shifts in alliances and strategies. This is why we meet every five sur, and I am grateful we do. With that said, you do

proclaim concern about the collapse of the Conclave on a regular basis."

"You suspect hyperbole."

"I seek clarity."

"All right," Lause said, and set down her iet, undrunk. "Then here is clarity for you. I see the collapse of the Conclave because General Gau has been pressing for votes in the assembly that he shouldn't be. I see it because his enemies have been pushing votes to counter and undermine the general's power, and they are losing by smaller margins with each outing. For the first time there is open dissatisfaction with him, and with the direction of the Conclave."

"For the first time?" I said. "I seem to recall an attempted coup in the not ancient past, brought on by his decision not to punish the humans for the destruction of our fleet at the Roanoke Colony."

"A small group of discontents, trying to take advantage of what they saw as a moment of weakness on the part of the general."

"Which almost succeeded, if you recall. I remember the knife coming down toward his neck, and missiles immediately thereafter."

Lause waved this away. "You're missing my point," she said. "That was a coup, an attempt to wrest power from the general by extralegal means. What I see now, with every vote, is the power and influence—the moral standing—of the general being whittled away. You know that Unli Hado, among others, wants to put the general to a confidence vote. If things progress, it won't be long until he gets his wish."

I drank from my cup. Unli Hado had recently challenged General Gau's actions dealing with the human Colonial Union, and been knocked back when he asserted evidence of new human colonies that turned out not to exist—or more accurately, they had been so thoroughly removed from their planets by the Colonial Union that there was no hard evidence they had ever existed. Those colonies had been quietly removed at General Gau's request; Hado had been fed the

outdated information on their existence in order to be made to look like a fool.

And it had worked; he had looked like a fool when he attempted to call out the general. What I and the general had underestimated were the number of other assembly members who would willingly continue to follow a fool.

"The general isn't a member of the assembly," I said. "A confidence vote wouldn't be binding."

"Wouldn't it?" Lause said. "The assembly can't remove the general from the leadership of the Conclave, no. There's no mechanism for it. But you understand that a no confidence vote on the general is the fatal crack in his armor. After that General Gau is no longer the beloved, and almost mythical founder of the Conclave. He's merely another politician who has overstayed his welcome."

"You are the chancellor of the assembly," I noted. "You could keep a confidence vote on the general from reaching the floor."

"I could," Lause agreed. "But I could not then keep the confidence vote on *me* from reaching the floor. And once I was out of the way, Hado, or more likely one of his more pliable lieutenants, would ascend to my position. The general's confidence vote would not be avoided, merely delayed."

"And what if it were to happen?" I asked, setting down my cup. "The general is not under the illusion that he will be the head of the Conclave forever. The Conclave is meant to survive him. And me. And you."

Lause stared at me. In point of fact, as Lause had no eyelids, she was always staring. But in this case it was with intent.

"What is it?" I said.

"You have to be joking, Hafte," Lause said. "You have to be either joking or oblivious to the fact that it is General Gau himself who has kept the Conclave together. It's loyalty to him and his idea of the

Conclave that kept it from falling apart after Roanoke. It was loyalty to him that allowed it to survive the coup attempt that followed. The general knows this at least—he made everyone swear personal loyalty to him. You were the first to swear it."

"I also warned him of the dangers of doing it," I said.

"And you were right," Lause said. "Technically. But *he* was right that at that moment it was loyalty to him that kept the Conclave in one piece. It still does."

"We have perhaps moved on from that personal loyalty. That's what the general has worked toward. What we have all worked toward."

"We're not there," Lause said. "If General Gau is made to step down then the center of the Conclave falls away. Will this union still exist? For a while. But the union will be hollow, and the factions that already exist now will pull away. The Conclave will fracture, and then those factions will fracture again. And we'll be back to where we were before. I see it, Hafte. It's almost inevitable at this point."

"Almost," I said.

"We can avoid a fracture, for now," Lause said. "Buy some time and perhaps heal the fracture. But the general has to give up something he wants very much."

"Which is?"

"He has to give up the Earth."

I reached for my cup again. "The humans from Earth have not asked to join the Conclave," I said.

"Don't spout nonsense at me, Hafte," Lause said, sharply. "There isn't a representative in the assembly who doesn't know that the general intends to offer Earth significant trade and technological concessions, with the intent of drawing them into the Conclave sooner than later."

"The general has never said anything of the sort."

"Not publicly," Lause said. "He's been content to let his friends in the assembly do that for him. Unless you believe that we don't know

who is working Bruf Brin Gus's levers on this subject. It's not been exactly *discreet* about the favors it can pull from the general now. Or from *you,* for that matter."

I made a note to schedule a meeting with Representative Bruf at the earliest convenience; it had been warned against preening to other assembly representatives. "You think Hado would use any deal with Earth as leverage for a confidence vote," I said.

"I think Hado has a hatred of humans that borders on outright racism."

"Even though the Earth is not affiliated with the Colonial Union."

"That's a distinction too subtle for Hado," Lause said. "Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that it's a distinction that Hado will not bother to make, either for himself or to others, because it would interfere with his plans."

"Which are?"

"Do you have to ask?" Lause said. "Hado hates the humans, but he loves them too. Because they might get him to the job he really wants. At least he thinks so. The Conclave will have collapsed before he can get much use of it."

"So remove the humans, and we remove his lever."

"You remove the lever that he's grasping today," Lause said. "He has others." She reached for her cup of iet, saw that it had grown cold, and set it back down again. My assistant Umman popped his head into the room; my next meeting partner had arrived. I nodded to him and then stood. Lause stood as well.

"Thank you, Ristin," I said. "As always, our chat has been useful and enlightening."

"I hope so," Lause said. "A final piece of advice for the day, if I may. Get Hado in here the next chance you get. He's not going to tell you what he has planned, but it's everything else he says that will

matter anyway. Talk to him even briefly and you'll know what I know. And you'll know why I worry the Conclave is in trouble."

"That is very good advice," I said. "I plan to take it very soon."

"How soon?"

"As soon as you leave me," I said. "Unli Hado is my next appointment."

• • •

"I'm worried that the Conclave is being pushed toward destruction," Unli Hado said to me, almost before I had time to sit down after welcoming him into my office.

"Well, this is certainly a dramatic way to begin our discussion, Representative," I said. Umman discreetly slipped back into the office and deposited two bowls on my desk, one closer to me and one closer to Hado. Hado's was filled with niti, an Elpri breakfast food that would kill me if I attempted to eat it, but which Hado was known to relish. My own bowl had tidbits on it shaped like niti, but made of Lalan vegetable matter. I did not wish to die in this particular meeting. I had other plans for the rest of the sur. I nodded thanks to Umman; Hado appeared not to notice him. Umman slipped back out of the room.

"I didn't know that coming to you with a concern would be dismissed as drama," Hado said. He reached over and fished one of the niti out of his bowl, and then started sucking on it, loudly. I did not know enough about Elpri table manners to decide whether he was being rude.

"I would in no way dismiss your concerns, as drama or anything else," I replied. "But you may understand that from my end, leading with the destruction of the Conclave doesn't leave much room for anything else."

"Does General Gau still intend to bring the humans into the Conclave?" Hado asked.

"You know as well as I do that the general never lobbies a species to join the Conclave," I said. "He merely shows them the advantages and allows them to ask, if they are interested."

"That's a nice fiction," Hado said. He swallowed his niti and reached for another.

"If the humans asked to join the Conclave—if *either* of the human governments asked to join the Conclave, because as you know there is more than one—then they would go through the same process as everyone else has."

"For which the general would heavily place his support for the humans."

"I would imagine only to the extent he has done for any of our species, including the Elpri, Representative Hado. You may recall him standing in the well of the Grand Assembly, praising your people at the time of the vote."

"For which of course I offer him many thanks."

"As you should," I said. "As should every member state of our Conclave. In point of fact, to date, the general has welcomed every species who has asked to join and was willing to accept the terms of union. I wonder why you would think—if in fact either human government wanted to join our union—that the general would do otherwise."

"It's because I know something about the humans that the general does not."

"Secret information?" I said, and reached for one of my own tidbits. "With all due respect, Representative, your track record on secret information regarding the humans is spotty."

Hado offered what to anyone else would appear to be a genial smile. "I am well aware that I have a history of falling into the traps that you've set for me, Councilor. But between ourselves let's not pretend that we don't know what really happened."

"I'm not entirely sure I catch your meaning," I said, pleasantly.

"Have it your way," Hado said, and then reached into his vest to pull out a data module. He placed it on my desk between us.

"Is this your secret information?" I asked.

"It's not secret, just not well known. Yet."

"Will you give me a précis, or should I just plug it into my computer?"

"You should look at all of it," Hado said. "But the short version is that a whistleblower from the Colonial Union has released information on all of the Colonial Union's military and intelligence operations for the last several of their decades. Including the destruction of our fleet at Roanoke, the attacks on Conclave ships and planets using pirated Conclave member trade ships, biological experimentation on Conclave citizens, and the attack on Earth Station."

I picked up the data module. "How was this whistleblower able to procure all this information?"

"He was an undersecretary of the Colonial Union's State Department."

"I don't suppose this undersecretary is available to us."

"My understanding is that the Colonial Union reacquired him," Hado said. "If the Colonials' standard practices hold, if he's not already dead, he's a brain suspended in a jar."

"I'm curious how this information came to *you*, Representative Hado."

"I got it this morning by diplomatic courier drone from Elpri," Hado said. "The information has been readily available there for an Elprian day. The information was apparently released widely. I wouldn't be surprised if you're offered the information by others, including your own planetary government, Councilor. Nor would I be surprised if it's offered to the Conclave itself by the end of the sur."

"We don't know if this information is reliable, is what you're telling me."

"What I've read of it—which has been the most recent events, primarily—seems accurate," Hado said. "It explains at the very least why we've been losing trade and cargo ships, and how the Colonial Union has been using them against us."

"It might not surprise you to know that the Colonial Union has maintained their own civilian ships have been pirated."

"I won't deny I am not fond of humanity, but that isn't to say that I think they are stupid," Hado said. "Of course they would be doing a magnificent job of obfuscating their plans."

"And what are their plans, Representative Hado?" I asked.

"The destruction of the Conclave, obviously," Hado said. "They tried and failed at Roanoke Colony. They are trying again by using our own trade ships against us."

"At that rate they should topple us at about the same time as the heat death of the universe," I said.

"It's not the physical damage. It's persisting despite the obvious strength of the Conclave."

"And attacking Earth Station?" I said. "How does that relate to the Conclave?"

"The Colonial Union has denied the attack. Who else should Earth think could orchestrate it?"

"But you don't want the humans in the Conclave in any event."

"Neither do I want Earth reconciled with the Colonial Union, offering it soldiers and colonists again."

"In which case I'm not sure why you would oppose Earth's admission into the Conclave," I said. "That would shut the door to the Colonial Union using it as a recruiting station."

"And frustrate the Colonial Union even further, making them more dangerous," Hado said. "And aside from that, how would we ever be

able to trust any humans? If one group of humans were at war with us and the other our ally, how many of our so-called allies would feel obliged, by species solidarity, to act against our interests?"

"So we are damned if we admit the humans, and damned if we don't."

"There is a third option," Hado said.

I stiffened at this. "You know the general's opinion on preemptive war, Representative Hado," I said. "And on genocide."

"Please, Councilor," Hado said. "I am suggesting neither, obviously. I am suggesting, however, that war with the humans is inevitable. Sooner or later they will attack, out of opportunism or out of fear." He pointed to the data module. "The information here makes that much clear. And when they do, if the general does not have a response, then I fear what happens next for the Conclave."

"The Conclave is robust," I said.

"Again, it's not the physical damage to the Conclave I worry about. The Conclave exists because its members are confident in its leader. The general spared the humans once when he could have crushed them. If he does it twice, there comes the legitimate question of why, and for what purpose. And whether his judgment can be relied upon any further."

"And if the answer is 'no,' then I suppose you have an idea of who might take his place," I said. "To restore this 'confidence.'"

"You misunderstand me, Councilor," Hado said. "You always have. You think I have ambitions beyond my station. I assure you I do not. I never have. What I want is what you want, and what the general wants: the Conclave, whole and secure. He has the power to keep it that way. He has the power to destroy it. It all depends on how he deals with the humans. All of them."

Hado stood, bowed, took a final niti from his bowl, and left.

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"He thinks *this* is going to be the thing that destroys the Conclave," Vnac Oi said, holding the data module Unli Hado had given me. I had traveled to its office, in part to get a change of scenery and in part because as the Conclave's head of intelligence, its office was substantially more secure than my own.

"I think it's more the thing Hado plans to use to try to oust Tarsem," I said.

"It took some nerve to drop it on your desk," Oi said. "He might as well have put a sign up over his head announcing his plans."

"Plausible deniability," I said. "It can never be said he was not the first to alert us to this information and the dangers within. He's being the perfect example of a helpful and faithful officer of the Conclave."

Oi gave a whistle of derision. "The Gods should protect us from such faithfulness," it said.

I pointed to the data module. "What do we know about this?"

"We know Hado wasn't lying about how he got it," Oi said. "This information has showed up at several dozen Conclave worlds already and more reports are coming in. The data is consistent across the various planets. It even showed up here."

"How?"

"Diplomatic courier skip drone. Credentials forged, which we determined right away, but we examined the data anyway. Same data as in every other packet we've been offered."

"Any idea where it came from?"

"No," Oi said. "The skip drone is Faniu manufacture. They make hundreds of thousands of them a year. The drone's navigational cache was clear, no skip history on it. The data itself was unencrypted and in standard Conclave format."

"Have you looked at it?"

"There's too much to just look at. Reading it manually would take more time than we'd want. We've got computers doing semantic and

data analysis on it to get the important information and trends. That will still take several sur."

"I mean did *you* look at it," I said.

"Of course," Oi said. "There was a document that came with it highlighting particular bits of information whoever sent it thought might be relevant to us. I skimmed."

"What do you think?"

"Officially or personally?"

"Both."

"Officially, anonymous information that shows up randomly at one's door should be treated as suspicious until proven otherwise. That said, the documents we've done spot analysis on conform strongly to the Colonial Union's data formatting and known activity. If it's fake, it's very cleverly done, at least superficially."

"And personally?"

"You know we have sources in the Colonial Union, yes?" Oi said. "Ones I don't go out of my way to let either you or the general know too much about?"

"Of course."

"As soon as this started popping up I sent a query to one of them about this alleged whistleblower, this Undersecretary Ocampo. Just before you got here I got a ping back. He exists, or at least *did* exist. He went missing several of their months ago. He would have had access to this information. So personally I think it's very possible this is legitimate."

"Hado seemed to be under the impression that the Colonial Union had found this Ocampo."

"I have no information on that, and I'd be curious to know how he does," Oi said.

"It might be a rumor."

"This would be the time for rumors about this information," Oi agreed. "Do you want me to look into it?"

Before I could answer my handheld buzzed out the sequence that told me Umman was trying to reach me for a critical purpose. I answered. "Yes?"

"Your manicurist called and wishes to inquire about your next appointment," Umman said.

"I'm in Oi's office, Umman," I said, glancing over at Oi, whose expression was studiously neutral. "And you can be sure it already knows about my 'manicurist.'"

"I'll just send the message over, then," Umman said.

"Thank you." I terminated the call and waited for the message.

"Thank you for not being offended that I know your business," Oi said.

"Thank you for not pretending to be offended that I would suggest you know my business," I said.

The message arrived. "And what does Colonel Rigney of the Colonial Union have to say?" Oi asked.

"He says, 'By this time you've probably seen the data alleging to be from our Department of State Undersecretary Ocampo,'" I read. "'Some of it is true. Much of it is not. What is not is of concern to both the Colonial Union and the Conclave. We are sending an envoy to treat with the Conclave on this to reach an amicable resolution before things escalate. She is Ambassador Ode Abumwe, known to you, and will be in possession of information to clarify or refute what you have in your possession. I ask, with the basis of our previous association as proof of earnest intent, that you see her and hear what she has to say.' And then there's data on Ambassador Abumwe's intended arrival time and position."

"The Colonial Union's coming here without pretense," Oi said. "That's interesting."

"They want to indicate their openness," I said.

"That's one interpretation," Oi said. "Another is that they don't think they have time to do their usual sneaking about before this blows up in their faces. And another will be that this is simply a move in a long-term game to maneuver us to where they can strike us most effectively."

"That's not been my experience of Colonel Rigney or Ambassador Abumwe."

"Which doesn't matter much because *officially* you haven't had any experience with either Rigney or Abumwe, have you?" Oi said, and raised tendrils to pause my reply. "It's not about what you or I think, Hafte. It's about how Unli Hado and those around him will interpret the Colonial Union's move here."

"You think we shouldn't meet with them."

"I don't have an opinion one way or another," Oi said, lying diplomatically. "That's not my job. But I do suggest that you talk with the general about it and find out what he and you want to do. And that you do it sooner than later. 'Immediately' would be my suggestion."

"I have another meeting first," I said.

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"You know that the nations of Earth would never condone or participate in any action that would bring about the destruction of the Conclave," said Regan Byrne, the envoy to the Conclave from the United Nations, a diplomatic corporation that was not actually the government of the Earth, but which pretended to be for situations like this.

I nodded, minutely, to avoid hitting my head on Byrne's ceiling. Byrne's offices were former storage units that had been hastily cleared out when it was decided that it would be beneficial to have an Earth presence of some sort at the Conclave headquarters. These storage units

were amply tall for most Conclave species, but then, again, Lalans were tall and I was taller than most.

I stood because there was nowhere for me to sit; Byrne usually came to visit me, not the other way around, and her office did not have a stool that would accommodate me. Byrne had the grace to look embarrassed by this fact.

"I assure you that no one in the Conclave has suggested that this new information has cast the Earth in a suspicious light," I said, choosing not to mention that Unli Hado, in point of fact, had accused the planet of being full of traitors and spies. "What I am interested in knowing, prior to my meeting with General Gau, is whether the Earth has received this information, and what their response has been to it."

"I was about to call Umman when he called me to set up this meeting," Byrne said. "I received a skip drone from the UN this morning with the information, to give to you in case you did not already have it, and the denial of involvement that I just offered you. Done up much more formally, of course. I will have all of it sent to your office."

"Thank you."

"I have been also told to tell you that we're sending a formal diplomatic party to brief the Conclave on the Earth's definitive response to this new information. They will be here in less than a week. The diplomatic party is under the aegis of the UN but will consist of representatives of several Earth governments. That information is also in the data packet I am sending along."

"Yes, fine," I said. This meant that we were about to be in the rather awkward position of having diplomatic representatives from both the Earth and the Colonial Union at the Conclave's headquarters at the same time. This would have to be managed. I frowned.

"Everything all right, Councilor Sorvalh?" Byrne asked.

"Of course," I said, and smiled. Byrne offered up a weak smile in return. I remembered that my smile looked rather ghastly to humans, in no small part because it was offered by a creature who was close to twice their height. "This will all be of great use to me when I meet with the general."

"That's good to hear," Byrne said.

"And how are you, Regan?" I asked. "I'm afraid I don't see you or other members of your mission as often as I would like."

"We're good," Byrne said, and I was aware that I was once again being lied to diplomatically. "I think most of the staff are still getting our bearings and learning the map of the station. It's very large. Larger than some cities back on Earth."

"Yes it is," I said. The headquarters of the Conclave was a space station carved into a large asteroid and was one of the largest engineered objects ever made, not counting some of the more impressive bits made by the Consu, a race so technologically advanced above the rest of the species in this area of space that they should not be included in an estimation, simply out of politeness to everyone else.

"It would have to be," I continued. "We have to house representatives from four hundred worlds, all their staff, and many of their families, plus a great number of the Conclave's own government workers and their families, plus all the support workers and their families. It adds up."

"Is your family here, Councilor Sorvalh?"

I smiled, more gently this time. "Lalans don't quite have the family structure that humans and many other species do. We are more communally oriented, is the best way to put it. But there is a strong Lalan community here. It's very comforting."

"It's good to hear," Byrne said. "I miss my family and other humans. It's lovely here, but sometimes you just miss home."

"I know what you mean," I said to her.

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"If the Conclave must end, at least this is a pretty place for the end to begin," General Tarsem Gau, leader of the Conclave, said to me, standing next to where I sat in the Lalan community park. The park, one of the first created on the Conclave's asteroid, was large enough for all three hundred of the Lalans stationed at Conclave headquarters to meet, relax, deposit eggs, and monitor the hatched young as they grew.

Tarsem spotted some of the Lalan young, playing on a rock on the far side of the park's small lake. "Any of yours?" he asked. Jokingly, because he knew I was too old for further egg-laying.

But I answered him seriously. "One or both of them might be Umman's," I said. "He and one of the diplomats were in phase not too long ago and she laid her eggs here. Those young are just about the right size to be theirs."

There was a sudden squawk as an older youth emerged from behind the rock, wrapped its jaws around one of the two youth sunning themselves, and began to bite down. The trapped youth began to struggle; the other one scuttled away. We watched as the younger youth fought to survive, and lost. After a moment the larger youth stole away, younger youth still in its jaws, to eat it in privacy.

Tarsem turned to me. "That still always amazes me," he said.

"That our young prey on each other?" I asked.

"That it doesn't bother *you* that they do," he said. "Not just you. You or any Lalan adult. You understand that most intelligent species are fiercely protective of their young."

"As are we," I replied. "After a certain point. After their brains develop and their consciousness emerges. Before then they are simply animals, and there are so many of them."

"Did you feel that way when they were your own?"

"I didn't know which were mine at the age of that unfortunate youth," I said. "We lay our eggs in common, you know. We go to our

local common ground, to the laying house. I'd lay my eggs into a receiving basket and take the basket to the house supervisor. The supervisor would put them in the room set up for the eggs the house received that day. Thirty or forty women would lay eggs at a house each day. Ten to fifty eggs each. Fifteen of our days to hatch and then another five days before the outside door to the room was opened to let the surviving young out into the park. We didn't see the eggs again once we left them. Even if we went back the day the outside door was opened, we wouldn't know which of the survivors were our own."

"But I've met your children."

"You met them after they grew into consciousness," I said. "Once you're an adult, you're allowed to take a genetic test to learn who your parents are, provided they had consented to be placed in the database. The two you met are the ones who decided to find out. I may have had others who survived but they either didn't take the test or chose not to contact me. Not everyone asks to know. I didn't."

"It's so—"

"Alien?" Tarsem nodded. I laughed. "Well, Tarsem, I *am* an alien to you. And you to me. And all of us to each other. And yet, here we are, friends. As we have been for most of our lives now."

"The conscious parts of it, anyway."

I motioned back to the rock, where the youth who had run away had returned. "You think the way we cull our young is cruel."

"I wouldn't say that," Tarsem said.

"Of course you wouldn't say it," I said. "You wouldn't say it because you're diplomatic. But it doesn't mean you don't *think* it."

"All right," Tarsem admitted. "It does seem cruel."

"That's because it *is,*" I said, turning again to Tarsem. "Terrible and cruel, and the fact that adult Lalans can just watch it happen and not weep in agony over it means that *we* might be terrible and cruel as well. But we know a story that other people don't."

"What's the story?"

"The story is that not too long ago in Lalan history, a philosopher named Loomt Both convinced most of Lalah that how we culled our young was wrong and immoral. He and his followers convinced us to protect all of our young, to allow them all to grow into sentience, and to reap the benefits of the knowledge and progress so many new thinking individuals would give us. I imagine you think you know where this is going."

"Overpopulation, famine, and death, I would guess," Tarsem said.

"And you would be wrong, because those are obvious things, to be planned for and dealt with," I said. "We did have a massive population boom, but we'd also developed spaceflight. It's one reason why Both suggested we stop culling our youth. We populated colony worlds quickly and grew an empire of twenty worlds almost overnight. Both's strategy gave us a foothold into the universe and for a time he was revered as the greatest Lalan."

Tarsem smiled at me. "If this is meant to be a cautionary tale, you're doing a bad job of it, Hafte," he said.

"It's not done yet," I said. "What Both missed—what we all missed—was the fact that our preconscious life is not wasted. How we survive our culling leaves its traces in our brains. In point of fact, in a very real sense, it gives us wisdom. Gives us restraint. Gives us mercy and empathy for each other and for other intelligent species. Imagine, if you will, Tarsem, billions of my people, emerging into consciousness without wisdom. Without restraint. Without mercy and empathy. Imagine the worlds they would make. Imagine what they would do to others."

"They could be monsters," Tarsem said.

"Yes they could. And yes we were. And in a very short time we tore each other apart and tore apart every other intelligent species we met. Until we had lost our empire and almost lost ourselves. We were

terrible and cruel, and in time we wept in agony over it and everyone we had doomed to a conscious death." I pointed again to the youth on the rock. "What happens to our young on their way to consciousness is pitiless. But it strengthens us as a people. We take our pain and our risk early, and as a result we as a people are saved."

"Well," Tarsem said. "This is not what I was expecting when I suggested we meet here. I just thought it was a pretty place to talk."

"It is a pretty place," I said. "It's just not *nice*."

"Tell me what you think about the news today."

"About the Ocampo data?" I asked. Tarsem nodded. "I think it means very bad things for the Conclave. Ristin Lause is right, Tarsem. The Conclave is in a fragile state because you've been pushing things too hard, including bringing the humans of Earth into the Conclave. I've warned you about that."

"You have."

"And you haven't listened."

"I've listened," Tarsem said. "I have reasons not to agree."

I gave Tarsem a look that expressed my disapproval, which he took without complaint. I continued. "She's also right that if you lose a confidence vote, it could fracture the Conclave. You already have dozens of species wanting to bolt and either go it alone or form smaller alliances they think they will be able to control. If you give the Conclave an opportunity to crack, it will crack."

"That's independent of the Ocampo data."

"But the Ocampo data feeds right into that," I said. "It seemingly confirms that the humans can't be trusted and that they mean us harm, the Colonial Union portion of humanity, in any event. If you try to bring Earth into the Conclave after this, Unli Hado will use that to suggest that you're letting the enemy through the front door."

"So we hold off on admitting Earth into the Conclave."

"Then Hado hits you with leaving it available to the Colonial Union to retake. Make no mistake, Tarsem. Hado is going to use Earth against you no matter what you do. And if you take the unspeakable third option of attacking the Colonial Union without direct provocation, Hado will use your first military defeat as an opportunity for the confidence vote he's looking for. Every option leads to the assembly voting to remove you. And when that happens it all falls apart."

"This used to be easier," Tarsem said. "Running the Conclave."

"That's because you were building it," I said. "It's easier to be the aspirational leader when the thing you're building doesn't exist. But now it exists, and you're not aspirational anymore. Now you're just the chief bureaucrat. Bureaucrats don't inspire awe."

"Do we have time to finesse this?"

"We might have had, if both the Colonial Union and the Earth weren't sending full suites of diplomats for discussions," I said. "Having one set of them would be bad enough. Having them both here, posturing over the Ocampo data, means that Hado and his partisans are going to have real live targets for their ire and might use that to push a confidence vote sooner than later. If you think they're going to miss an opportunity to trim down your reputation, with real-life human diplomats, then you'll be playing right into their hands."

"Then tell me what you suggest," Tarsem said.

"That you don't see Ambassador Abumwe when she arrives. Turn her away publicly. That deprives Hado of the spectacle of the Colonial Union being received diplomatically."

"And what about the new information they promised?"

"Leave that to me. Colonel Rigney and I can set up a meeting and I can get it then. All discreetly."

"He won't be happy."

"We don't need him to be happy," I said. "We need him to understand the political landscape we're working in. I can make him do that."

"And the diplomats from Earth?"

"We'll have to meet with them," I said. "And as for Earth itself, we need to get it out of the reach of the Colonial Union without bringing it into the Conclave."

Tarsem smiled. "I'm looking forward to hearing how this is going to happen," he said.

"We have them ask for protection," I said.

"Protection," Tarsem said. "From whom?"

"From the Colonial Union, who attacked Earth Station," I said.

"If it did."

"It doesn't matter if it did. It matters that Earth believes it's a threat."

Tarsem gave me a look that suggested a complicated response to this statement, but decided not to immediately follow it up. "So they ask for protection," he said. "What does that solve?"

"It solves Unli Hado, for one," I said. "Because the Earth *doesn't* ask to join the Conclave, and it *doesn't* stay vulnerable to the Colonial Union. And when it asks for protection, we'll assign three of our member states to take up the guard."

"Which three?"

"Two of them it doesn't matter. Pick who you like. But the third—"

"The third is the Elpri," Tarsem said.

"Yes," I said. "And then Hado is trapped. His entire ploy is based on you being too soft on the humans. But now one branch of humanity is publicly rebuffed and the other is guarded by Hado's own species. He said to me today that his sole concern is the unity of the Conclave; let's hold him to his words, and let's make him do it publicly. He's trapped by his own posturing."

"And you think the Earth will go along with this."

"I think they believe we both have a common enemy, and they know they are defenseless without us," I said. "The only thing we have to do is not make it look like we're bottling them up, like they were under the Colonial Union."

"Although that's actually what you're proposing we do."

"These are the options at the moment."

"And you think this will actually work," Tarsem said.

"I think it buys us time." I turned back to the rock where the young Lalan had been a few minutes before, and noticed it wasn't there anymore. There was a splotch of blood, however. Whether it belonged to the youth or the one who had been killed before it, I didn't know. "Maybe enough time to save the Conclave from collapsing. And that's enough for now."

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PART TWO

"Wake up, Hafte," someone said.

I woke up. It was Vnac Oi. I stared at it for a moment before gathering enough wit to speak.

"Why are you standing in my sleeping chamber?"

"I need you awake," it said.

"How did you get in?"

Oi gave me a look that said, *Really, now*.

"Never mind," I said. I lifted myself off my sleeping pedestal and moved to my wardrobe to get dressed. I don't usually prefer other people see me without clothing, but it's for their sake, not mine; Lalans don't have a taboo against nudity. "Tell me what's going on, at least."

"A human ship has been attacked," Oi said.

"What?" I looked out from my wardrobe at Oi. "Where? And by whom?"

"In our space," Oi said. "And we don't know. But it gets worse."

"How does it possibly get worse?" I slipped a basic robe onto my body and stepped out of the wardrobe. Other accoutrements could wait.

"The humans' ship is out of control and being dragged in by the gravity of this asteroid," Oi said. "We have four serti before it hits."

"That doesn't leave much time," I said. There are thirty serti in a sur.

"It gets worse," Oi said.

"Stop *saying* that," I said. I stood in front of Oi, now. "Just tell me what's going on."

"There are humans trapped on the ship," Oi said. "Including the diplomatic mission from Earth."

• • •

"Here is the *Odhiambo*," Loom Ghalfin said, pointing at the image of a tumbling spacecraft on the briefing room monitor. Ghalfin was the director of the Conclave's ports and facilities. In the briefing room were me, Oi, General Gau, Chancellor Lause, and Regan Byrne. Along the wall of the briefing room stood several of Ghalfin's subordinates, all of whom looked as if they were lined up to be shot. Well, and if *Odhiambo* struck the asteroid, it would be the most merciful thing that could be done to them.

"The *Odhiambo* skipped into Conclave space roughly a hundred ditu ago," Ghalfin said. Ninety ditu in a serti, so not very long ago at all. "Almost as soon as it entered Conclave space, it reported several explosions and extensive damage."

"Do we know what caused the explosions?" Gau asked, and nodded toward Oi. "Vnac here told me and Hafte it was an attack."

"We don't know what it was," Ghalfin said. "At entry the *Odhiambo* was reporting, verbally and by automated monitoring, that all systems were nominal. The next thing we know everything went haywire."

"Vnac?" Gau said.

"My analysts started looking at data as soon as the damage reports came in, cross-referencing with what we know of the *Odhiambo,*" Oi said. "The *Odhiambo* is a lend-lease ship, originally an Ormu freighter. The pattern of damage it reported right after the explosions occurred

isn't consistent with what might happen with a power systems failure. It is consistent with what would happen if the power systems were attacked to cause secondary damage."

"So an attack," Gau said.

"Seems likely to me." Oi motioned to Ghalfin. "Although I will bow to any additional information our colleague here can offer."

"We're combing through our own data now to see if anyone or anything else skipped in just before or close to the arrival of the *Odhiambo,*" Ghalfin said. "We're back a full sur on the data now and nothing's pinged."

Tarsem nodded. "Let's get back to the current situation."

"The current situation is that the *Odhiambo* is heavily damaged and tumbling in Conclave space. The explosions have imparted a small bit of momentum on the ship toward the asteroid, and the asteroid's native gravity is doing the rest. Left unchecked it will impact in three serti, fifty-five ditu." The image Ghalfin was showing tracked out and showed the projected path of the *Odhiambo* toward the Conclave's headquarters.

"What will the impact damage here?" I asked.

"No habitats, either general or specialized," Ghalfin said. "We're not looking at any substantial death toll. But the *Odhiambo* will impact directly on one of our solar power farms, and several surface-level agricultural domes are nearby, which are at substantial risk of damage. How much damage depends on how the *Odhiambo*'s power systems fail at impact. Best-case scenario is we lose the solar farm, solely from the impact. Worst-case scenario is the ship's power systems fail spectacularly in addition to the impact."

"In which case the asteroid gains a shiny new crater, debris gets thrown far and wide, including potentially into the docking area, damaging other ships, and into other areas of the asteroid, including

possibly populated areas," Oi said. "Which makes the potential death toll a bit more substantial."

"And the crew of the ship?" Tarsem asked.

"Sixty crew, ten passengers, all part of the diplomatic team from Earth," Ghalfin said. "The ship's captain reported six dead, eight seriously wounded from the explosions, most from the engineering department. The dead are still on the ship. The wounded and most of the rest of the crew evacuated the ship via lifepods. The captain, executive officer, and the chief engineer are still aboard."

"But our diplomats are trapped," said Regan Byrne.

"That's what the captain reported," Ghalfin agreed. "The passenger quarters housing your team are sound but the passageways into their quarters are heavily damaged. There's no way in or out without landing on the hull and cutting our way in."

"The problem with that is that the *Odhiambo*'s power systems are damaged," Oi said. "They could go at any time. If we send rescue crews and the ship goes up, we lose our people as well as theirs."

"You can't just leave them trapped there," Byrne said, staring at Oi.

"We have to rationally judge the risks involved," Oi said, staring back. It turned to face the room. "And we have to make a decision soon." It pointed to the image of the *Odhiambo.* "The ship is three and a half serti from impact, but *we* don't have that much time. Right now, if we destroy the ship with our defenses, it's far enough away that we can control the debris and minimize any damage to ourselves and other ships. After that serti, it becomes progressively harder to contain the possible damage. Add to that the fact the ship can go at any time, in which case its destruction is uncontrolled, which makes our risks greater."

Tarsem turned to Ghalfin. "Loom?" he said.

"Director Oi's not wrong," she said. "Controlled destruction of the *Odhiambo* is the best option and the sooner the better. We cannot

allow it to impact, and the longer we wait the more chance the ship's power systems will rupture."

"That means potentially sacrificing the diplomats," I said. "Which is an unacceptable option."

"I agree," said Lause, looking at Oi. "If the Conclave doesn't at least make the *attempt* to save them, what does that say about us?"

"You're asking our rescue crews to risk their own lives," Oi said.

"Which is part of their job," Lause said.

"Yes, but not stupidly," Oi replied. It turned to Ghalfin. "Your estimate for the *Odhiambo*'s power systems to fail, please."

"In the next serti?" Ghalfin asked.

"Yes."

"Given the damage we know about, I'd say sixty percent," Ghalfin said. "Which means realistically the chance is greater, because the damage we know about is the bare minimum possible."

"We're asking our people to go to their deaths, almost certainly," Oi said.

"Ms. Byrne," Tarsem said. "I want to know your thoughts."

Byrne took a moment to collect herself. "I can't tell you I don't want you to save my people," she said. "I can't even tell you that I will entirely understand if you didn't. What I can say is that if you don't, I'll recommend to the governments of Earth that your refusal to act not be a factor in future discussions."

Tarsem looked at me after the comment. I stared back, silently, knowing that after all this time he would almost certainly know what I thought of Byrne's *realpolitik* answer.

"How long until we can have rescue crews on the way?" Tarsem asked Ghalfin.

"They've been prepping since the *Odhiambo*'s first distress call," Ghalfin said. "They're ready to go when you want them."

"I want them," Tarsem said. "Send them, please."

Ghalfin nodded, and turned to a subordinate, who handed her a headset conforming to her species. Tarsem turned to Byrne. "We'll get them out, Regan."

"Thank you, General," Byrne said. Her relief flowed off her like a waterfall.

"General, we have a complication," Ghalfin said.

"What is it?"

"Hold on—" Ghalfin held up a hand while she listened to her headset. "A rescue attempt is already under way."

"By whom and under what authority?" I asked.

"It's being undertaken by the *Chandler,*" Ghalfin said, after a moment of listening to her headset. "It's a human ship, from the Colonial Union. It skipped in right around the time we started this meeting."

I looked over to Tarsem, who was smiling at me. I knew what that meant. It meant, *Now aren't you glad I decided to meet with the Colonials despite your advice*.

"What do you want to do now?" Ghalfin asked Tarsem.

"I want you to tell the *Chandler* they have a serti to complete their rescue and after that we're vaporizing the *Odhiambo* for the safety of our headquarters," Tarsem said. "And I want you to tell them that we're sending a crew to assist if they need it and to observe if they don't." Ghalfin nodded and spoke into her headset.

Then Tarsem turned to me.

"Don't tell me, I already know," I said. I got up.

"Where are you going?" Byrne asked, looking up at me.

"I'm going with our rescue team," I said. "To observe."

"You might blow up," Oi said.

"Then the Earth knows I blew up helping to save their people." *And knows the Conclave didn't let the Colonial Union take on all the risk alone. Or sacrifice,* I thought, but chose not to say. I knew that was

part of Tarsem's math. I nodded to those in the room and made my way to the exit.

"Hafte," Tarsem said, and I paused at the doorway. I looked back to him. "Come back alive, please."

I smiled and left.

• • •

"All right, this pilot is just showing off," Torm Aul, the rescue shuttle pilot, said to me, as we approached the *Odhiambo* and the *Chandler*. The rescue shuttle contained me, Aul, zis co-pilot Liam Hul, whose seat I was currently occupying while Hul loitered in the general cabin, and six fellow members of the Fflict species as the rescue team. The Fflict recognized five genders: male, female, zhial, yal, and neuter. Aul was zhial, and ze liked zis pronouns accurately stated. I would too, in zis position.

"Which pilot?" I asked.

"The pilot of the *Chandler,*" Aul said, pointing at the monitor that gave zim zis external view. "The *Odhiambo* is tumbling chaotically so the *Chandler* is matching its movements."

"Why would it do that?" I asked.

"It's safer for the people running the rescue," Aul said. "Makes the two ships stable relative to each other. But it's difficult to do because the *Chandler* pilot has to track the *Odhiambo*'s movements precisely."

"Once the ship started tumbling it should continue to do so in the same manner," I said. "I think that's close to a thermodynamic law."

"Yeah, but that assumes no additional input of momentum," Aul said, and pointed to the *Odhiambo* in the monitor. "But the *Odhiambo* is damaged and venting all sorts of things. And we can't tell when those venting events will happen. No, it's a mess. So the *Chandler* pilot's tracking all of that in as close to real time as it can."

"Could you do it?"

"If I wanted to show off, sure," Aul said. I smiled at this. "But I wouldn't do it with anything larger than this shuttle. Whoever the *Chandler*'s pilot is, it's doing it with an entire ship. If it messes up, you're going to have two ships tumbling down on headquarters, not just one."

"We need to tell them that," I said.

"Trust me, Councilor, they're way ahead of you," Aul said.

"Hail the *Chandler,* please," I said. "Tell them we've come to offer assistance if they wish it."

Aul did as ze was told, muttering into a headset in zis own language while I watched the two human ships tumble in tandem.

"The captain of the *Chandler* is named Neva Balla, it sends its compliments and says that it requires no assistance at this point," Aul said, after a moment. "It says that they are under some time pressure and incorporating us into their plans would just add to the pressure. It asks us to hold position at twenty klicks relative—that's about twenty-five chu—and to monitor the *Odhiambo* for power surges or rapidly rising temperatures."

"Can we do that?"

"Maintaining a twenty-five-chu relative distance is something we can do on autopilot. And this shuttle's packed with a good amount of sensory apparatus. We're good."

I nodded up to the monitor. "Any way we can stabilize the image of the ships so they don't look like they're tumbling? I want to be able to see what's happening without getting vertigo."

"No problem."

"If the captain of the *Odhiambo* is still on the ship, ask it to send us a real-time data feed, please," I said.

"Will do."

"Also, Captain Neva Balla is 'she,' not 'it.'"

"You sure?"

"I've met her before," I said. "Humans generally prefer to not be called 'it' whenever possible."

"The things you learn about people while you're on the job," Aul said.

• • •

"Here we go," Aul said, nodding to the monitor. On it a lone figure stood in an open airlock on the *Chandler,* directly across from the *Odhiambo*. The distance between the two ships was less than thirty plint—about fifty meters in human measurement. Aul was right: Whoever was piloting the *Chandler* had impressive control.

The figure in the airlock continued to stand, as if waiting for something.

"Not a good idea to run out the clock," Aul said, under zis breath.

A stab of light shot from the *Chandler,* striking across and at a small angle from the figure in the airlock.

"They're firing on the ship," I said.

"Interesting," Aul said.

"Why is it interesting?"

"They need to cut into the hull," Aul said. Ze pointed at the beam. "Normally for a rescue we'd send a crew over with some particle beam cutters to get through the hull. We have a couple here on the shuttle, in fact. But it takes time. Time they don't have. So instead they're just burning a big damn hole in the hull with a beam."

"It doesn't look very safe," I said, watching. A venting blast of air puffed out of the *Odhiambo,* crystalizing in the vacuum wherever the beam didn't turn it into plasma.

"It's definitely *not,*" Aul said. "If there's someone in the cabin they're cutting into, they probably just died of asphyxiation. That is, if they weren't vaporized by the beam."

"If they weren't careful they could have blown up the ship."

"The ship's going to blow up anyway, Councilor," Aul said. "No reason to try to be dainty."

The beam shut off as abruptly as it began, leaving a three-plint hole in the *Odhiambo*'s hull. In the monitor, the figure in the *Chandler* airlock launched itself toward the hole, trailing a cable behind it.

"Okay, now I get it," Aul said. "They're running a cable from the *Chandler* to the *Odhiambo*. That's how they're going to get them off the ship."

"Across a vacuum," I said.

"Wait for it," Aul said. The figure disappeared into the *Odhiambo*. After a moment, the cable, which had drifted slightly, tightened up. Then a large container started moving across the cable.

"I'm guessing vacuum suits, harnesses, and automatic pulleys in that," Aul said. "Get them suited up, secure them in a harness, and let the pulleys do all the work."

"You sound like you approve."

"I do," Aul said. "This is a pretty simple rescue plan with pretty simple tools. When you're trying to save people, simpler is better. A lot fewer things to go wrong."

"As long as the *Chandler* can keep in sync with the *Odhiambo*."

"Yes," Aul agreed. "There is that. This plan has all its complications in one place, at least."

There were several moments of nothing obvious going on. I took the time to look at the co-pilot monitor set, on which we were tracking the *Odhiambo*'s power and heat signatures. No excitement there either, which was a good thing. "You might suggest to the *Odhiambo*'s captain that any remaining crew might want to disembark as soon as possible," I said to Aul.

"With all due respect, Councilor," Aul said. "I'm not going to suggest to a captain that it abandon its ship a single moment before it makes that decision on its own."

"Fair enough." I glanced back over to the monitor with the *Odhiambo* on it. "Look," I said, pointing. The first of the diplomats was making its way across the line, swaddled in a highly reflective vacuum suit, chest in a harness, trailing behind a pulley.

"That's one," Aul said. "Nine more to go."

The *Chandler* collected seven before the *Odhiambo* blew itself up.

There was almost no warning. I glanced over as the seventh diplomat disappeared into the *Chandler*'s airlock and saw the feeds on the co-pilot's monitor spike into critical territory. I yelled to Aul to warn the *Chandler* just as the external monitor showed a wrenching jerk, severing the cable between the two ships. Aul zoomed out the picture in time to catch the eruption on the *Odhiambo,* midships.

Aul yelled in zis headset and suddenly the image in the monitor began spinning wildly—or appeared so, as the monitor had stopped tracking with the two ships' movements and had reoriented itself to our perspective. The *Odhiambo* had begun tearing itself apart. The *Chandler* had begun moving away from its doomed compatriot.

"Come on, come on, come on," Aul was yelling at the monitor. "Move it, you stupid shit-for-brains, you're too close." I had no doubt ze was yelling at the *Chandler*'s pilot.

And ze was right; the *Chandler* was too close. The *Odhiambo* had now split in two and the pieces were moving independently of each other, with the fore portion now careening dangerously close to the *Chandler*.

"They're going to hit!" Aul yelled.

And yet they didn't; the *Chandler*'s pilot yawed and skewed its ship, moving it across three axes in a mad ballet to avoid collision. The separation between the ships widened, too slow for my taste: fifty plint, eighty, a hundred fifty, three hundred, one chu, three chu, five chu, and then the *Chandler* stabilized its movement relative to Conclave headquarters and began to pull away at speed from the *Odhiambo*.

"You should be dead!" Aul yelled at the monitor. "You should be dead, your ship should be dead, you should all be dead! You magnificent shit-eater!"

I looked over to Aul. "Are you all right?"

"No," ze said. "I'm pretty sure I've soiled myself." Ze looked over and on zis head was an expression that I assumed was of sheer amazement. "That *should not* have happened. Everyone on the *Chandler* should be dead. The *Chandler* should be an expanding cloud of debris. That was the single most amazing thing I've ever seen in my life, Councilor. I'd be surprised if it weren't the single most amazing thing you've ever seen, too."

"It might be in the top few," I allowed.

"I don't know who that pilot is, but I am going to buy that shit-eater all the drinks it wants."

I intended to respond but Aul held up a hand, listening into the headset. Then it looked up at the monitor. "You have got to be kidding me," ze said.

"What is it?"

"Those three other diplomats and the *Chandler* crewman," ze said. "They're still alive." Aul spoke into zis headset and zoomed in on the aft portion of the *Odhiambo,* where the *Chandler* had burned its hole through the hull.

And as we zoomed in, we saw it: a reflecting suit, launching out from the hole, tumbling into space, followed by a second, followed by a pair, holding on to each other—the final diplomat and the crewman from the *Chandler*. The *Odhiambo* spun away from them, slowly.

"How much breathable air do you think they have?" I asked Aul.

"Not a lot," ze said.

I glanced over to the co-pilot's monitor, which still erroneously showed the *Odhiambo* as a single unit. The fore of the ship was rapidly

cooling; all power had shut down and heat and power were venting into space.

The aft of the ship, on the other hand, was warm and getting warmer as I watched.

"I don't think they have much time," I said.

Aul followed my gaze to the co-pilot's monitor. "I think you're right," ze said, then looked up at me. "You didn't bring a vacuum suit with you, by any chance, Councilor?"

"I did not," I said. "And the very fact of your question makes me begin to regret that very much."

"It's fine," Aul said. "It just means I have to do this without a co-pilot." Ze pressed a button on his pilot monitor. "Attention, team," ze said. "You have two ditu to get on your vacuum suits. In three ditu I'm pumping the air out of the hold and opening her up. Be ready to take on passengers at speed. Have emergency air and heat prepared. These people are going to be cold and near asphyxiated. If they die once you get them, I'm leaving you out here."

"Inspiring," I said, after ze had finished.

"It works," Aul said. "I've only had to leave them out here once. Now, slide in a little more, Councilor. I have to seal up this compartment. Unless you want to try holding your breath for a while."

• • •

"The four of them haven't drifted too far from each other," Aul said, as we were underway, two ditu later. Ze put an image on the main screen showing the positions of the diplomats. "And two of them are together so we really only have three targets." A curving line swept through all three positions. "We open the gate, bring our speed down, and literally let them drift into the hold. Three targets, three ditu, we go home, we're heroes for the sur."

"You'll curse us if you put like that," I said.

"Don't be superstitious," Aul said.

The aft portion of the *Odhiambo* erupted.

"Oh, come *on,*" Aul yelled.

"Give me tracking, please," I said. Aul transferred the screen to the co-pilot monitor. The main portion of the *Odhiambo*'s aft was still spinning away from the diplomats, but a large chunk of debris was now launching itself in a different direction entirely. I watched as the shuttle's computer plotted its trajectory.

"This debris is going to hit these two," I said, pointing to the paired diplomats.

"How long?" Aul asked.

"Three ditu," I said.

Aul seemed to think about it for a moment. "All right, fine," ze said.

"All right, fine, what?" I asked.

"You might want to make your center of gravity as low as possible. The inertial and gravity systems in this thing are pretty reliable, but you never know."

I hunkered down. "What are you about to do, Aul?"

"It's probably best you wait until it happens. If it works, it will be really great."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then it'll be over quickly."

"I'm not sure I like where this is going."

"If it's all the same, Councilor, don't talk to me until it's over. I need to concentrate."

I shut up. Aul pulled up the diplomats' positions on zis pilot screen and overlaid the trajectory of the debris. Then ze started moving the shuttle forward. Aul stared at zis pilot screen, typed furiously into it, and never looked up.

I on the other hand looked at the external view monitor and saw a distant rising mass of debris, and our shuttle moving inexorably closer

to it. We appeared to be on a suicide mission straight to the heart of that debris. I glanced over to Aul but ze was in focus, all attention drawn to the screen.

At almost the last possible instant I saw on the monitor a white starburst which I registered—too late!—as a vacuum suit we were going to hit head on, just as the debris rose like a leviathan below us. I sucked in a breath to shout, saw the images on the monitor streak, and then clenched for the violence of the debris smashing into our shuttle from below. As Aul promised, it would be over quickly.

"Huh," Aul said, and spoke into zis headset. "You get them? Yes. Yes. Right. Good." Ze looked over to me. "Well, that worked," ze said.

"What worked?" I asked.

"High-speed rotation around the target," Aul said. "It takes a tiny bit of time for the shuttle's inertial field generators to register a new entity and adjust its velocity. If I picked up our new passengers on a straight path at the speed I was going, they would have turned into jelly against the interior of the shuttle. So I rotated us very quickly, to give the field just enough time to register their presence and match them to us."

"Oh."

"That's the short version," Aul said. Ze was entering commands into zis pilot monitor, presumably to pick up the two remaining diplomats. "I also had to tell the shuttle what speed I wanted the targets to have relative to the interior of the shuttle, and burn off the momentum we suddenly had dumped into the system. And such. Point is, it worked."

"Where's the debris?"

"Behind and above us. It missed us with a couple plint to spare."

"You almost killed us."

"Almost," Aul agreed.

"Please don't do that again."

"The good news is, now I don't have to."

Picking up the other two human diplomats was the very definition of anticlimactic.

As we headed back to the Conclave's asteroid, Aul restored air to the cabin and opened up the pilot's compartment. "One of the rescued diplomats would like to speak to you," Aul said.

"All right." I ducked and found my way to the main cabin. As I did so a Fflict nudged past me, nodding; the co-pilot, anxious to get back on duty. I ducked again and entered the cabin.

The rescue team were busily attending to the diplomats, all of whom were covered in self-heating blankets and sucking air through masks. All except one, who was covered only in what I now recognized was a Colonial Defense Forces combat unitard. The unitard's owner was kneeling, speaking to one of the diplomats, a woman with dark, curled hair. She was holding his hand with a grip that I imagined would be uncomfortable for anyone other than a genetically engineered supersoldier, which is what the unitard's owner was. His green skin gave him away.

The soldier saw me and motioned to the woman, who stood up, shakily. She removed her mask and shrugged off her blankets—a bad idea because she started shivering immediately—and walked over to me, hand extended. The soldier stood with her, slightly behind.

"Councilor Sorvalh," the diplomat said. "I'm Danielle Lowen, of the United States Department of State. Thank you so much for rescuing me and these other members of my team."

"Not at all, Ms. Lowen," I said. "Welcome to the Conclave's headquarters. I am only sorry your entrance was so … dramatic."

Lowen managed a shaky smile. "When you put it that way, so am I." She began shivering violently. I glanced over at the soldier, who picked up the hint, stepped away, and returned with a blanket. Lowen

accepted it gratefully and slumped slightly into the soldier, who bore her weight easily.

"Of course, we of the Conclave cannot take all the credit for your rescue," I said, nodding at the soldier.

"I regret to say that I was only seventy percent successful with my own rescue attempt," the soldier said.

"No, you were one hundred percent successful," I said. "You got seven safely to the *Chandler,* and you knew that if you got the other three away from the ship, we would come find you."

"I didn't know," he said. "I did hope."

"How lovely," I said. I turned to Lowen. "And you, Ms. Lowen? Did you hope as well?"

"I trusted," Lowen said, and looked at the soldier. "It's not the first time this one's tossed me out into space."

"I was with you the whole way the last time, too," the soldier said.

"You were," Lowen said. "That doesn't mean we have to keep doing it."

"I will keep that in mind," the soldier said.

"The two of you have an interesting history, clearly," I said.

"We do," Lowen said, and then motioned to the soldier. "Councilor Sorvalh, if I may introduce you to—"

"Lieutenant Harry Wilson," I said, finishing her sentence.

Lowen looked at the both of us. "You two have met before, also?"

"We have," I said.

"I'm popular," Wilson said, to Lowen.

"That's not the word I would have used," she said, and smiled.

"If memory serves, the last time we met there were also exploding starships," I said, to Wilson.

"That's odd," Lowen said. "The last time I saw Harry, there were exploding starships, too."

"It's coincidental," Wilson said, looking at Lowen and then at me.

I smiled at him. “Is it?”

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PART THREE

"I didn't expect you to challenge me so much on my request to come back alive," Tarsem Gau said to me, as I entered his office after the rescue mission.

Tarsem's private office was, as ever, cramped; after years in spaceships and their tiny spaces Tarsem still felt most comfortable in close quarters. Fortunately I was not claustrophobic, and I agreed with the political wisdom of his personal office being smaller than that of even the most undistinguished Conclave representative. The office was even smaller than the one given to the human envoy, which I suspect might shock Ms. Byrne. Fortunately Tarsem kept a sitting pedestal for me so I did not have to crimp my neck.

"If you don't want me to almost die, you shouldn't task me to missions where dying is a real possibility," I remarked, sitting. "Or at the very least don't put me on missions where the pilot is a mad Fflict."

"I could have zim disciplined, if you would like."

"What I would like is for you to give zim a commendation for quick thinking and admirable piloting, and never put me on another of zis shuttles."

Tarsem smiled. "You have no sense of adventure."

"I do have a sense of adventure," I said. "It's overawed by my sense of self-preservation."

"I don't mind that."

"Nor do you seem to mind testing the proposition, from time to time."

"I don't want you to be bored."

"I am, alas, never that," I said. "And now with chatty preliminaries out of the way, I want to impress upon you what an utter disaster this entire event has been for us."

"I thought it went rather well," Tarsem said. "The humans were saved, the *Odhiambo* was successfully destroyed without collateral damage to headquarters or other ships, and thanks to the actions of your mad Fflict in rescuing the stragglers, we remain in the good graces of Earth, and even got a tiny bit of credit with the Colonial Union diplomats for rescuing one of their own."

"A thin skin of self-congratulation on a rather messy pudding," I countered. "Which includes the very likely fact of an enemy action against the *Odhiambo* in our own space, which we neither saw coming nor could defend against, the fact that now we are no longer able to keep separate the humans from the Colonial Union and the Earth, as we intended to do for these discussions, and the fact that all of this plays perfectly well into the plans of those who are even now gathering against you in the Grand Assembly."

"I seem to recall you arguing to save the human diplomats," Tarsem said. "And me taking that advice."

"You were going to attempt to save the diplomats regardless of what I advised," I said, and Tarsem smiled at this. "And the decision to save them was more important than mere politics. Nevertheless, saving them will be seen by your enemies as proof of your regard for the humans, not a sign of basic decency."

"I don't see why I should care how they see it. Anyone with intelligence will understand what happened."

"Anyone who isn't blinded by ambition and frustration with the Conclave will understand it. But those who are blinded will *choose* not to see it, as you well know. They will also choose to see Colonials rescuing the earthlings as hugely significant, which it is."

"You don't think any ship so close would have made the attempt to rescue those diplomats?"

"No," I said. "I think the *humans* might have made the attempt regardless. These particular humans, at the very least."

"You think well of the Colonials."

"I think well of Ambassador Abumwe and her team, including their CDF liaison," I said. "I wouldn't trust their government with a cooking fire, and I don't advise *you* do, either, no matter what comes out of Ambassador Abumwe's mouth in your meeting with her."

"Noted," Tarsem said.

"Even the two sets of humans arriving within a serti of each other will be augured as consequential," I said, returning to the topic at hand. "And this was an easily avoidable blunder, as I warned you not to meet with the Colonials."

"And if I had not agreed to, then all the humans would likely be dead because our rescue mission might have failed. And you dead with them, I might add."

"You wouldn't have sent me on the rescue mission if the Colonials hadn't been there," I pointed out. "And if the humans from Earth were dead that would indeed be tragic, but it would not then be leverage for your enemies."

"The fact their ship was destroyed in our space would be."

"That's something we could finesse with findings and if necessary with resignations. Torm Aul would not be pleased to be out of a job but that's easily dealt with."

"This line of conversation is the sort of thing that makes me smile when people who don't know you praise your gentility to me," Tarsem

said.

"You don't keep me around for gentility. You keep me around because I don't lie to you about your situation. And your situation is now worse than it was when we woke up this morning. It's going to get worse from here."

"Should I send both sets of humans away?"

"It's too late for that now. Everyone will assume you've had clandestine meetings with both groups and your enemies will intimate you had that meeting with both at once, because they are functionally the same in their eyes."

"So no matter what, we're damned."

"Yes," I said. "Yes we are. Although as always I am merely providing you with information. It's what you do with it that counts."

"I could resign."

"Excuse me?"

"I said, I could resign," Tarsem said. "You said before that I was most effective when I was building the Conclave, when I was a symbol of a great idea, and not an administrator of a bureaucracy. All right, fine. I resign, stay a symbol, and let someone else be the administrator."

"Who?"

"You could take the job," Tarsem said.

"What in this benighted universe gave you the impression that I would ever *want* it?" I asked, genuinely shocked.

"You might be good at it."

"And I might be appalling at it."

"You've done pretty well so far."

"That's because I know my talents," I said. "I'm the advisor. I'm the councilor. I'm occasionally the knife you slide into someone's side. You use me well, Tarsem, but *you* use me."

"Then who might you suggest?"

"No one," I said.

"I'm not going to live forever, you know. Sooner or later it has to be someone else who is in charge."

"Yes," I said. "And until that moment I'm going to make sure it will remain you."

"That's loyalty," Tarsem said.

"I am loyal to you, yes," I replied. "But even more than that I am loyal to the Conclave. To what you've built. To what we've built, you and I and every member state has built, even the stupid ones who are now trying to tear it apart for their own gain. And right now, being loyal to the Conclave means keeping you where you are. And keeping certain people from making confidence votes in the Grand Assembly."

"You think we're that close to it," Tarsem said.

"I think a lot matters in how the next few sur play out."

"What do you suggest?"

"At this point you have to take Ambassador Abumwe's report," I said. "You have yourself locked into that action."

"Yes."

"Abumwe expects to make it to you directly."

"She does," Tarsem said. "I imagine she expects you will be there, as well as Vnac Oi, either in person or via surreptitious listening device."

"She does not expect the report to stay private for long."

"These things rarely do."

"Then I suggest getting to that point a little earlier than expected," I said.

• • •

"You still think this is a good idea," Vnac Oi said to me.

"It's a useful idea," I said. "This is a thing separate from good."

Oi and I sat in the far reaches of the Grand Assembly chamber, on a level typically reserved for observers and assistants to representatives, the latter of whom would occasionally swoop down into the inner recesses of the chamber, like comets in a long-term orbit, to do their

representative's bidding. Normally when I was in the chamber I sat on the center podium as Tarsem did his regular question-and-answer period, counting heads. This time, Tarsem was not on the podium, and I wanted a slightly different vantage for the head counting.

The Grand Assembly chamber was filled. Tarsem sat, alone, on the bench usually reserved for the chancellor and her staff; for this particular address the chancellor had been demoted to her usual representative bench and her staff milled at the level just below mine. I saw some of their expressions; they were vaguely scandalized by their demotions.

On the level below that were the humans. The Colonial Union diplomats sat on the side of the arc; the humans from Earth filled the other side. There was a substantial gap between them.

"We still don't know what's in this report," Oi said.

"A fact I find very impressive, considering who you are," I replied.

"Yes, well," Oi said, and made a gesture of annoyance. "Obviously we made an attempt."

"What did you do?"

"We tried to infiltrate the *Chandler*'s system," Oi said. "We got shunted into a sandbox with a single file on it, with the title 'For Vnac Oi.'"

"Dare I ask what was in it?"

"A video clip of a human exposing its posterior and the words 'Wait like everybody else.'"

"It's nice they thought of you."

"It's less nice that their computer systems are now firewalled too well for us to get into them."

"You have other sources in the Colonial Union, I'm sure."

"I do," Oi said. "But not for this. This is why this is not a good idea, Hafte. You have no idea what this human is about to say. You don't know what damage it can do."

"It's the general's choice to do it this way, not mine," I said, which was technically true.

"Please." Oi gave me a small look. "This has your smell all over it. Don't pretend I don't know who put this idea into his head."

"I put lots of ideas into his head," I said. "And so do you. That's our role. He decides what to do with them. That's *his* role. And look." I pointed. Ambassador Abumwe had emerged from behind the central point and was moving to the lectern that had been provided for her. "It's time."

"Not a good idea," Oi repeated.

"Maybe not," I allowed. "We're about to find out."

The sounds of hundreds of species of intelligent beings quieted as Abumwe reached the lectern and placed, unusually, several sheaves of paper on them. Usually human diplomats kept their notes on handheld computers they called PDAs. This information was apparently sensitive enough that Abumwe chose to keep it in a format difficult to replicate electronically. Next to me I heard Oi make a sound of annoyance; it had seen the paper too.

"To General Tarsem Gau, Chancellor Ristin Lause, and the representatives of the constituent nations of the Conclave, I, Ambassador Ode Abumwe of the Colonial Union, send honorable greeting and offer humble thanks for this opportunity to address you," Abumwe began. In headsets, her words were being translated into hundreds of different languages. "I wish that these circumstances were happier.

"As many of you know, very recently information has come into the possession of many of your governments. This information appears to detail both historical records relating to Colonial Union activity against many of you, and against the Conclave generally. It also purports to outline future plans against the Conclave and several of

your nations generally, as well as against the Earth, the original home of humanity.

"Much of the information in this report—specifically information relating to past action—is true."

There was an eruption of noise in the chamber to this. I understood why and yet I was not impressed. Abumwe had essentially admitted that things we already knew to be true were in fact true; that the Colonial Union had warred against many of us, and against the Conclave. This was not news to anyone, or should not have been. I scanned the room for the affronted, as opposed to the unimpressed.

"However—*however,*" Abumwe continued, holding up a hand for silence. "I have not come here to either justify or to apologize for past action. What I am here to do is to warn you that the other information in the report is false, and that it represents a danger to all of us. To the Colonial Union, to the Conclave, and to the nations of Earth.

"We believe, we have believed, that each of us is the other's enemy. Let me suggest today that there is another enemy out there, one that threatens human and Conclave nations alike. That this enemy, though small in numbers, has been extraordinarily adept in strategy, using dramatic action for outsized effect, terrorizing each of us while allowing us to believe we are terrorizing each other. That this enemy means to destroy both the Colonial Union and the Conclave for its own dogmatic ends."

Abumwe looked up to her staff two levels down from me and nodded. One of them, who I recognized as Hart Schmidt, tapped the PDA he was holding. Beside me Oi grunted and pulled out its own computer. "I'll be damned," it said softly, and then was entirely lost into its screen.

"I have just authorized my staff to release to Vnac Oi, your director of intelligence, a complete accounting by the Colonial Union of our knowledge of this mutual enemy, a group which calls itself

Equilibrium," Abumwe said. "This group is comprised of members of species unaffiliated with either the Conclave or the Colonial Union, including, prominently, the Rraey. But it also has active in it traitors from other governments and nations, including Tyson Ocampo, former undersecretary of state for the Colonial Union, Ake Bae of the Eyr, Utur Nove of the Elpri, and Paola Gaddis of Earth. Their schemes include, among many others, a planned assassination of General Gau."

The chamber erupted in chaos.

I scanned quickly to where I knew Unli Hado sat. He was up from his seat, screaming. Around him several other representatives were screaming and gesturing at him. I scanned again, to the Eyr representative, Ohn Sca. Sca was pushing past several other representatives, trying to exit the chamber; other representatives were pushing back, trying to force Sca back into its seat. I glanced up to the humans; a couple of the ones from Earth were yelling at the ones from the Colonial Union. In the middle, three figures were leaning into each other, apparently conferring. I recognized them as Danielle Lowen, Harry Wilson, and Hart Schmidt.

"Oi," I said, over the din.

"She's not lying," Oi said, still looking at its screen. "About the file, I mean. It's huge. And it's here."

"Send it out," I said.

"What?" Oi looked up at me.

"Send it out," I repeated. "All of it."

"I haven't had time to mine it."

"You didn't have time to mine the Ocampo data either," I said.

"That's not a recommendation for sending *this* out."

"The longer you have it solely in your possession, the better position you give those who just now got accused that we are massaging the data, in collusion with the Colonial Union. Send it out. Now."

"To whom?"

"To everyone."

Oi's tendrils danced across its screen. "I don't think this is a good idea, either," it said.

I turned my attention back to Abumwe, who was waiting silently at the lectern. I was beginning to wonder if I should have assigned her a security detail. I also wondered when she was going to speak again.

That, at least, was answered momentarily. "None of us is innocent," she said, forcefully. The chaos began to settle. "*None* of us is innocent," she said again. "The Colonial Union and the Conclave, those from Earth and those outside of our governments. All of us have people who saw weaknesses, who saw pressure points, and who saw ways to use our own ways and stubbornness against us. This threat is real. This threat is both practical and existential. If it isn't met by all of us, all of us are likely to be destroyed."

"You are the enemy!" someone shouted to Abumwe.

"I may be," Abumwe said. "But right now, I'm not the enemy you should worry about." She walked off the podium, to a rising chorus of anger.

• • •

"How *dare* you," Unli Hado spat at Abumwe.

We were in the conference room adjacent to Tarsem's public office, the impressive one he used for formal events. In the room were Tarsem, me, Oi, Lause, Abumwe, Hado, Sca, Byrne, Lowen, and Harry Wilson; essentially, representatives of every group called out in Abumwe's speech. Tarsem had us all pulled into the room immediately after the speech.

"How dare you," Hado said again. "How dare you question my loyalty, or the loyalty of my nation to the Conclave. How dare you suggest that any of my people would conspire against it, or conspire with *you*."

"I didn't *dare,* Representative Hado," Abumwe said. She sat at the conference room table, impassive. "I merely told the truth."

"The truth!" Hado said. "As if the Colonial Union had ever bothered with *that* particular concept."

"Where is Utur Nove, Representative Hado?" Abumwe asked. "Our information about him tells us that he was a diplomat of some note among the Elpri. If you doubt the information that we've provided, why not ask him?"

"I'm not obliged to stay apprised of the whereabouts of every member of the Elpri diplomatic corps," Hado said.

"That may be, but it's of interest to me," Oi said. "And I've just looked at the cached version of his information. We have Utur Nove allegedly retired for several Elpri years, and offered a sinecure at a research foundation. The foundation's contact information for Nove has him 'on sabbatical,' with no additional information."

"Are you serious, Director Oi?" Hado said. "The absence of information is not the same as the presence of information. I knew Utur Nove. There is nothing in his past that even suggests he would act against Elpri or the Conclave."

"Not against Elpri, I'm sure," Oi said. "But against the Conclave?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you have been immensely critical of the Conclave recently. It's not unreasonable to assume you are offering a perspective shared by your government at large."

"I have been critical of *them*!" Hado flung an arm in the direction of Abumwe, who continued to sit impassively. "These humans, who represent the single largest material threat to the Conclave in our history. Or have you forgotten Roanoke, Oi?" Hado turned to Tarsem. "Have *you,* General?"

"I don't recall the Colonial Union pretending to be an ally, Hado," Oi said.

"Do that again," Hado said, turning his attention back to Oi. "Accuse me of treason one more time, Director Oi."

"Enough, both of you," Tarsem said. Hado and Oi quieted. "No one will accuse anyone here of treason, or of faithlessness to the Conclave."

"It's too late for that, General," Sca said, speaking for the first time. It glowered at Abumwe.

"Then let me say it plainly," Tarsem said. "*I* have not accused either you or Unli Hado of treason or faithlessness, nor will I. In this particular case, this is a statement that matters."

"Thank you, General," Sca said, after a moment. Hado said nothing.

Tarsem turned to Abumwe. "You've dropped a bomb on us, haven't you?"

"I offered to share this information with you alone, General," Abumwe said.

"Yes you did, but that's not the relevant part," Tarsem said. "The relevant part is that you've accused us of having traitors in our midst."

"Yes," Abumwe said. "Traitors. And spies. And opportunists. And all of the above, in one or more combinations. Just like we have." Abumwe nodded to Byrne and Lowen. "Just like they have. But that's not the real problem, General. There have always been traitors and spies and opportunists. Our current problem is that all of our traitors and spies and opportunists have found each other and decided to work against us, for their own ends."

"And what do you propose we do about it?" Oi asked Abumwe.

"I am not proposing *we* do anything about it," Abumwe said, and turned back to Tarsem. "Allow me to be blunt, General."

"By all means," Tarsem said.

"We need to be clear why I am here," Abumwe said, turning her attention back to Oi. "I am not here because the Colonial Union feels fondly toward the Conclave or because we believe sharing this

information will allow our two unions to move in a more friendly direction." Abumwe motioned to Hado, who gave every impression of being offended that a human would dare to bring attention his way. "Representative Hado may be wrong about his obvious suspicions concerning this information, but he's not wrong that the Colonial Union has been a material threat to you. We have been."

"Thank you," Hado said, and then immediately appeared to realize the inappropriateness of his comment.

"It's nothing I need to be thanked for," Abumwe said, and I admired the subtle stomp of the statement, adding to Hado's embarrassment. "I am merely stating an obvious fact. This isn't an overture or a thawing of relations. I am here because we have no other choice but to share this information with you. If we allow the Equilibrium's lies about our intentions to spread unchallenged, two things are very likely to happen. One," Abumwe motioned again to Hado, "he or someone like him would be demanding the Conclave attack and destroy the Colonial Union."

"Which it could do," Sca said.

"We do not disagree," Abumwe said. "But the cost of doing so would be high, and it would not be nearly as easy as some people would want to suggest it is, despite the Colonial Union's current situation with regard to the Earth." She looked at Tarsem directly. "Humans have a term called 'pyrrhic victory,' sir."

"'Another such victory and we are undone,'" Tarsem said.

"You're familiar with the term, then."

"It pays to know one's enemy."

"No doubt," Abumwe said. "And no doubt you are aware that we know you as well as you know us. You could destroy us. But we would take you with us."

"Not all of us," Hado said.

"We would take the Conclave," Abumwe said, looking directly at Hado again. "Which is the only enemy here that matters, Representative Hado. And that is the second thing. Once we have bloodied the Conclave, diminished its vaunted reputation of being too big to fail, and have bled the fear of it out into the vacuum of the stars, the Conclave itself will crack." She pointed rather than motioned to Hado. "This one or someone like him will do it. Especially if, during this struggle with the Colonial Union, the Conclave moves to bring the Earth into its ranks."

"We have no official interest in joining the Conclave," Lowen said.

"Of course you don't," Abumwe said, looking at her. "At this point why would you, because at the moment you're getting the benefits of an association with the Conclave without any of the obligation. But if the Conclave and the Colonial Union go to war, you will start to worry that we will come to you and take what you used to give to us: soldiers. And then you'll ask to join the Conclave. And that will be the leverage someone like Representative Hado needs."

"Again we come to my alleged treason," Hado said.

"No, not treason, Representative Hado," Abumwe said. "Allow me to give you the compliment of assuming you are too intelligent for that. No, I imagine you, or someone like you, will position yourself as the savior of the Conclave, someone to rescue it from the shadow of itself that it's become. And if you can't get enough other members to come along, then perhaps you'll break away, with a few other like-minded nations, and call yourself the New Conclave or something. And after that, it won't take long. Because while you are too intelligent to commit treason, Representative Hado, I sense that you are not nearly intelligent enough to realize how your ambitions outweigh your ability to keep four hundred species together. Once again, bluntly: You're not good enough, sir. Only one person in this room is."

I glanced over to Oi, who glanced back. I knew it was enjoying the dressing-down Hado was getting from a representative of the species he hated the most.

"How arrogant of you to assume so much about me in these few ditu, Ambassador," Hado said.

"I didn't," Abumwe said. "We have a file on you." She turned to Sca. "And on you. And on every diplomat for every nation we know has a representative in Equilibrium, including our own. It's all in the report."

"I'd like to return to this report," Tarsem said.

"Of course," Abumwe replied.

"The existence of this report implied that you have a spy in Equilibrium, and have had for some time. Which makes me curious as to why you chose now to give us this information, if this group has represented a threat to both of us."

"Again I ask permission to be blunt."

"Ambassador Abumwe, at this point I cannot imagine you being otherwise."

"If Equilibrium had never done its own data dump, we never would have shared this," Abumwe said. "We would have been happy to take the information and shape it, and Equilibrium, to our own needs. I reiterate that we are not sharing this information to be friendly, General."

"Understood."

"But as to our spy, the fact of the matter is that we didn't have a spy. Equilibrium made an error and took a hostage it couldn't control. That hostage was smarter than his captors. He stole their data and one of their ships and brought both to us."

"Out of loyalty to the Colonial Union?"

"No," Harry Wilson said. "Mostly because Equilibrium pissed him off."

"Before we commit to trusting this information, perhaps we should consider the source," Hado said. "Where is this so-called source of yours?"

"As it happens, he's the pilot of the *Chandler,*" Abumwe said.

Hado turned to Tarsem. "Then I move he is brought here for questioning."

"It's not that simple," Wilson said.

"Why?" Hado said, to Wilson. "Is he somehow *incapable* of taking a shuttle ride?"

Wilson smiled at this for some reason.

• • •

"General Gau, Councilor Sorvalh, Representative Hado, and Ms. Lowen, allow me to introduce to you Rafe Daquin, pilot of the *Chandler*." Wilson motioned to the box on the bridge of the *Chandler,* in which a human brain had been placed.

"This seems familiar," I said, to Wilson, as I stared into the box.

"I thought you might think so," he said.

"Who did this to him?" Hado asked.

"Sir?" Wilson said.

"Removing brains from skulls is a thing the Colonial Union does," Hado said. "It's notorious for it."

"Are you asking me if the Colonial Union did this?"

"Yes, although honestly I wouldn't expect you to answer truthfully if it had," Hado said.

"You could ask him," Wilson said.

"Pardon?"

"You could ask Rafe," Wilson said.

"Yes, you could," a voice said, through speakers. "I'm literally right here."

"All right," Lowen said. "Mr. Daquin, who did this to you?"

"Put my brain in a box? That would be the group calling itself Equilibrium, Ms. Lowen," Daquin said.

"Why did they do it?" Tarsem asked.

"Partly to trim down the number of working parts they needed to run the ship," Daquin said. "Partly to make sure I stayed in their control. They assumed that I would do anything they wanted if they promised to give me back my body."

"Why didn't you?" Tarsem asked.

"Because I figured that they didn't have any intention of ever giving it back."

"But the Colonial Union could give you another body," Hado said. "They haven't. They're using you like this Equilibrium group did."

"They're growing me a new body as we speak," Daquin said. "It'll be ready soon. But Harry here asked me if I wouldn't mind being a part of the *Chandler*'s crew for a bit, especially for trips like these, where people might need convincing that Equilibrium is a thing and not just a convenient cover story for the Colonial Union."

"If this is real," Hado said.

"Get some scientists over here to test me if you like," Daquin said. "I like company."

"It still doesn't prove anything," Hado said, turning to Tarsem. "We're being asked to believe this unfortunate creature isn't being coerced into saying these reports are his. We can't believe that someone in his position can be expected to say anything but what his captors want him to."

"Captors," Daquin said, and the derision was hard to miss. "Seriously, who is this guy?"

"Representative Hado has a point," I said. "You're a brain in a box, Mr. Daquin. We have no assurance that you aren't being used."

"Do you want to tell them, Harry, or should I?" Daquin asked.

"For obvious reasons, you should," Harry said.

"General Gau, Councilor Sorvalh, you're aware that your director of intelligence tried to hack into the *Chandler*'s systems when we arrived, yes?" Daquin asked.

"We, we knew that," I said.

"Of course you did. You know what Director Oi found, right?"

"Oi said it was a picture of someone showing their posterior."

"Yup, that's called 'mooning,'" Daquin said. "I did that, Councilor. Not the mooning, for obvious reasons. But I put the picture where Director Oi would find it. I did that because I don't only pilot this ship, I *am* this ship. It is entirely and completely under my control. The *Chandler* has crew and they run operations—you can ask Captain Balla if you like, to confirm this—but ultimately they have only as much control over the ship as I allow them. Because this ship is me. And I choose to help. Without my cooperation, the only way the Colonial Union can control this ship is to destroy it. And I'd destroy it myself before that could happen."

"You still need sustenance, I assume," Tarsem said. "Your ship still needs energy. You have to rely on the Colonial Union for that."

"Do I?" Daquin said. "General, if I were to ask you for asylum right now, would you give it to me?"

"Yes," Tarsem said.

"And I assume you wouldn't let me starve."

"No,"

"Then you've just invalidated your own assertion."

"But you still need the Colonial Union to get your body back," Lowen said.

"To grow a new one, you mean."

"Yes."

"Ms. Lowen, there's a door to your left. When the ship was built, it was the captain's ready room. Go ahead and open it."

Lowen found the door and opened it. "Oh my god," she said. She opened the door fully so the rest of us could see.

Inside was a container with a human body in it.

"That's me," Daquin said. "Or will be me, anyway, once it's done growing and once I decide to put myself into it. Representative Hado, you can have your scientists check its DNA against the DNA in my brain here. It checks out. But the point is that no, the Colonial Union isn't holding my body hostage. It's not holding *me* hostage. It's not coercing me. Now, you can still believe it or not, but at this point, if you don't believe me, it's not because we haven't made an effort to make it easy for you to believe."

"Mr. Daquin," I said.

"Yes, Councilor Sorvalh."

"You were the one piloting during the rescue of the diplomats."

"Yes, I was," Daquin said. "We have two other pilots, but I was the one at the helm for that."

"I know a pilot who called it an amazing piece of piloting, and wants to buy you several drinks to commemorate it."

"Tell your pilot friend I accept, in theory," Daquin said. "The actual drinking part will have to wait."

• • •

"Are you happy?" I asked Tarsem, when he and I were again alone in his office.

"Happy?" he said. "What an odd question."

"I mean did everything you plan for the day happen."

"All I planned for was to have Abumwe give her speech, and that wasn't even *my* plan," Tarsem said. "That was yours. So I suppose I should ask you if *you're* happy."

"Not yet," I said.

"Why not?" Tarsem said. "Abumwe's speech entirely disrupted the momentum Unli Hado and his partisans had in pushing a no

confidence vote. The fact I assured Hado and Sca that I don't consider them traitors doesn't mean their reputations aren't irretrievably destroyed. Even if they stay on as representatives."

"I'm not going to pretend I didn't enjoy seeing Hado get crushed today," I said. "That vainglorious martinet deserved the thumping. But now we have the somewhat larger problem that both the Elpri and the Eyr have been smeared with the accusation of, if not treason, then treachery of the worst sort. And you know they're not going to be the only nations who harbor members of this Equilibrium group. Vnac is sifting through the data right now."

"You're worried about what's going to come out in the sifting."

"No," I said. "I'm worried that you're going to get accused of using it to start picking off political opponents, including entire nations. As much as I liked seeing Hado shut down, it didn't help that the Elpri, of all people, are one of the two peoples called out by name in Abumwe's report. No matter if Vnac clears her entire report—no matter if all of it is unimpeachably true—there will still be those who will see it only as a chance for you to settle scores at a moment when you were vulnerable."

"You ordered Oi to release the data to avoid that."

"I ordered it to release the data so it didn't look like you were colluding with the Colonial Union," I said. "That problem is solved. The other problem remains."

"What do you suggest?"

"I think you need to address this directly and personally and on the floor of the Grand Assembly."

"And what would you have me say there?"

"What you said to Hado and Sca," I said. "Only writ larger. Encompassing nations, not diplomats."

"We're going to find traitors," Tarsem said.

"Yes, but they are people. Individuals."

"Individuals who might be able to persuade their governments to leave the Conclave."

"All the more reason to make it clear that the actions of a misguided few don't reflect on the people as a whole."

"You think this will work."

"I think it's better than encouraging our members to start accusing each other of undermining the Conclave. That road goes nowhere we want to go."

"How committed are you to this idea?" Tarsem asked. "Presuming the Colonial Union isn't running a long con on us, which is a thing you've begged me to consider and so I shall, it's possible that entire member state governments *are* working to end the Conclave. We've had attempts before. We'd be allowing them to get away with it."

"No. We'd be offering them a way to step back from the abyss before we tumble into it."

"That's an optimistic way of looking at it."

"It's not optimistic at all. It's giving us more time to deal with the problem."

"And if we have no more time?"

"Then we deal with the problem now," I said. "But I think everyone is beginning to realize just how close the abyss is at the moment. Very few people actually want to go in."

"You are optimistic, then," Tarsem said. "Because at the moment I think there are still a few who think the abyss sounds like a very good idea."

"That's why I want you to convince them otherwise."

"I appreciate your faith in my abilities."

"It's not faith," I said. "It's trust."

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PART FOUR

"Which news do you want first?" Vnac Oi asked me. I was in its office again, the first meeting of the sur.

"You have good news?" I asked.

"No," Oi said. "But some of the news is less objectively bad than the rest."

"Then by all means let us begin with that."

"We're done with the first pass of semantic and data mining of the Abumwe report," Oi said. "And we've cross-referenced with information we have in our own databases. The very short version is that the data are less problematic than the data in the Ocampo report."

"'Less problematic.'"

"It means there are fewer obvious untruths compared to, and contradictions with, our own data set."

"So you're saying the Colonial Union, in a refreshing change of circumstances, is actually telling us the truth."

"I never said 'truth,'" Oi said. "I said there were fewer untruths that we can immediately see. And even if they are largely telling the truth, which is something we still have to ascertain, the truth in itself is not necessarily a positive thing. What they are telling the truth *about*—what information they are sharing with us—is just as relevant. When

Abumwe shared this with us what I really wanted to know is what she *wasn't* sharing."

"I need to know whether you think this Equilibrium group exists and is the threat Abumwe says it is."

"Yes to the first, and inconclusive to the second. We need a couple more passes through the data to be sure. But here is the thing about that, Councilor."

"I am imagining this is where the less good news graduates into the bad news," I said.

"You are correct, because right now *it does not matter* whether the Abumwe information is true or not," Oi said. "The general is correct that the Colonial Union and Abumwe dropped a bomb into our lap—a bomb you suggest we let her set off, I will remind you—and now all the chatter I'm hearing is our members triangulating toward it or away from it. We've introduced chaos into the usual mix of ambition and venality we lovingly call the Grand Assembly. Before, we had two primary groups in the chamber: those generally drifting away from the Conclave and those generally supporting it. Right now my analysts have identified six distinct emerging philosophical groups. Some of these believe the Ocampo report and some believe the Abumwe, and then there are some who don't care about the truth value of either but merely whether they can be used as tools to settle political scores. The group that especially worries me at the moment is the one my analysts are calling the 'purgers.' You can guess what the purgers want to do."

"The general is addressing the Grand Assembly about this very problem."

"No doubt because of your advice."

"That sounds more accusatory than usual, Director."

"Apologies," Oi said. "I don't mean to imply it was bad advice. Just that you appear to have more influence over the general than usual recently."

"I don't believe that's true."

"If you say so. At the very least everyone else is too busy to notice."

"Do you think the general is worse off than he was before, politically?" I asked, changing the topic.

"No," Oi said. "Before Abumwe addressed the Grand Assembly, a large faction had targeted the general in order to push one of their own into power. Now that faction has fragmented and all the factions are fighting each other. So if your plan was to divert attention away from the general, it worked. Of course, now there are complications. What was best for the general in the short term is not, I think, the best for the Conclave in the long term. You do see that, Councilor."

"I do," I said. "We buy time where we may."

"You bought yourself time," Oi agreed. "I don't think it's of very good quality."

• • •

In my own office, just before the general's address, I regarded Ode Abumwe, and she me. "I believe we might be two of a kind," I said to her, finally. "Two people who believe in the usefulness of truth, despite the environments in which we work."

"I am glad you believe so, Councilor," Abumwe said, and waited for me to continue.

"You were blunt yesterday in our meeting after your presentation," I said. "I was hoping you might be again."

"As you wish," Abumwe said.

"What does the Colonial Union hope to gain by sharing the information you have with us?"

"We hope to avoid a war with the Conclave," Abumwe said.

"Yes," I said. "But what more than that?"

"I was given no other brief, either publicly or privately," Abumwe said. "We knew Ocampo and Equilibrium wanted to set each of us on

the other for their own reasons. We knew it would end poorly for us, and that we would be obliged to make it end as poorly as possible for you as we could."

"Presenting us this information does not end the potential of conflict between us."

"No, of course not. But if conflict happens, it will be because of our own damn foolishness, and not anyone else's."

I smiled widely at this. Abumwe, a professional diplomat, did not flinch. "But you don't believe that your brief is the whole of the reason this information was given to us," I said.

"You're asking me for my opinion, Councilor."

"I am."

"No, I don't," she said.

"Will you offer me your thoughts as to some of the other reasons?"

"That would be irresponsible of me."

"Please."

"I would imagine we wanted what in fact happened," Abumwe said. "Using the information to destroy the comity of the Conclave and to force open the fissures that were already developing. You could destroy us, and even if we took you with us that would be of little comfort. Better if you destroyed yourselves without going through us first."

"And do you believe that's how it would happen?" I asked. "That members of the then-former Conclave, individually or severally, would conveniently forget it was your report that started us on the path to our destruction? Would forget Roanoke? Would forget all the other reasons we have to despise you?"

"What I believe is aside from what my responsibilities are to the Colonial Union."

"I understand that," I said. "But it's not what I asked."

"What I believe is that both our governments are in an impossible situation at the moment, Councilor," Abumwe said. "We've been

pushed there by this Equilibrium group, yes. But Equilibrium could not by itself have gotten us to where both of us are now. We can blame this situation on Equilibrium, or on each other. But we are where we are because we put ourselves there. I don't know if there's any way for us to avoid what's coming. The best we can do is put it off and hope something else develops along the way, to save us from ourselves."

"Another thing we have in common, Ambassador."

"I don't doubt it, Councilor," Abumwe said. "The rumor is that the general is going to address the Grand Assembly today."

"He is."

"He's hoping to repair the damage my report created."

"That's some of it, yes."

"If I'd have been him—or you—I wouldn't have let me address the assembly."

"If we hadn't have had you do it, we would have different problems."

"They might have been better ones."

"It's debatable," I said.

"Do you think it will help anything? The general addressing the assembly today."

"Let's hope it does," I said. "For both our sakes."

• • •

"We are at a critical time in the history of the Conclave," Tarsem was saying, from the lectern at the focus of the Grand Assembly. And then he launched into many more words.

I was not paying attention to the particular words. From my vantage point behind and to the side of him, I was doing what I do best: I was counting heads. Looking at the ones who were nodding attentively at what he had to say. Looking at the ones which were registering skepticism, or anger, or fear.

If you think this is an easy task to do across four hundred species, some of which do not have heads which show appreciable emotion, or indeed, some which do not have what might properly be construed as "heads," I certainly invite you to try it.

"You need to be paying specific attention to Prulin Horteen," I said to Tarsem, directly before he began his speech. "She's the one that Oi has targeted as being the head of this emerging 'purger' faction. We need to cut them off before they get any larger."

"I know what she is up to," Tarsem said. "I spoke with Vnac."

"When?"

"Just before I was here. While you were speaking to Ambassador Abumwe. I do have meetings you aren't present for, you know."

"I don't advise those."

"I don't imagine you would." Tarsem smiled. "Don't worry, Hafte. This speech will resolve a number of issues. I'm confident of that."

"It could be a start, in any event."

"We've made a good thing here," Tarsem said. "The Conclave, I mean. You and I and everyone else in this assembly. It's been a life's work making it."

"It's indeed a wonderful thing," I said. "If we can keep it."

"I think we will," Tarsem said.

"Start by tamping down Prulin Horteen," I said. "And Unli Hado while you're at it."

I glanced over to where I knew Hado would be. There was substantial room around him; it appeared he was in bad odor after the Elpri had been accused by Abumwe of participating in Equilibrium. Not too far from him, however, was Prulin Horteen, who no doubt thought she was helping Tarsem by trying to put entire species on the Conclave's chopping block. I returned my attention to Tarsem, who as it happened was addressing that very issue.

"… Director Oi and its analysts are even now sifting through the data of both competing reports to tell us what information is accurate, what isn't, and, importantly, what *isn't* being told to us. Until we have that full analysis and report from Oi's office, I cannot and *will not* speculate with regard to the loyalties of any of our member nations. Are there individuals within those nations who may mean the Conclave ill? Yes, of course. They will be found and they will be dealt with.

"But individuals are not precise mirrors of their nations. And regardless of which report you now place your faith in, the Ocampo report or the Abumwe report, the intention behind both is the same: the dissolution and destruction of the Conclave. A return to the violence and savagery between our nations that we all still remember. We cannot allow that to happen. *I* will not allow that to happen. We are not a hollow union. We all have chosen to take part in this best chance for peace.

"I repeat: We must not fall back into savagery. We are not a hollow union—"

Tarsem's lectern exploded.

I was not aware of it immediately. I was pushed backward by the blast and toward the ground. My physiology makes me or any Lalan difficult to topple. I fell nonetheless, stunned and deaf, and amazed that somehow I had found myself on the floor.

Then my mind snapped back into function, I screamed, and I dragged myself over to Tarsem.

He was torn apart but not dead yet. I grabbed him and held him as his eyes searched around, looking for something to focus on. Finally he found me.

He said nothing—I don't believe he could say anything at that point—but simply watched me looking at him, holding him in his last moments of life.

Then he stopped watching and left me.

As he did I became aware of the din and madness around me as representatives and their staffs climbed over each other trying to escape the Grand Assembly chamber. Then I became aware of Tarsem's security staff swarming over me and him, pulling me off of him and dragging the both of us away, me presumably to safety, and Tarsem to oblivion.

• • •

"You need to be examined by a physician," Oi said to me.

"I'm fine," I said.

"You're not fine. You're in shock and you're yelling because you can barely hear. And you are covered in blood, Councilor. Some of it might actually be yours."

We were in a secure room not far from the assembly chamber. I was surrounded by members of Tarsem's security detail, who were no longer his security detail because they had somehow fundamentally managed to fail at their task. The anger I felt at that fact was growing within me; I held it down and looked at the security officer closest to me.

"Go fetch me a physician," I said. "Preferably one familiar with Lalans."

The security officer looked up at me. "Councilor, perhaps it would be better if you went to the hospital itself, once we've secured the area."

"I don't recall asking you for your opinion," I said. "Do it. Now."

The security officer scuttled off. I returned my attention to Oi. "How did you miss this?" I asked.

"I don't have a good answer for you right now, Councilor," Oi said.

"No, I don't imagine you do. You don't have a good answer to how you could have missed someone planning to assassinate the general." I waved a bloody hand at the remaining security detail. "They don't have a good answer, I'm sure, how someone slipped past them to place a bomb at the lectern. No one has a good answer for who is in charge of

the Conclave right now. We are all without good answers for anything that actually matters right at this very moment."

"What would you like me to do, Councilor?" Oi asked.

"I would like you to go back in time and to have done your goddamned job, Oi!" I said, and this time I was yelling not because I could not hear very well.

"When this is all over, if you want it, you will have my resignation on your desk," Oi said.

I laughed, bitterly. "My desk," I said.

"Yes, *your* desk," Oi replied, forcefully. "And you're wrong, Councilor. I don't have a good answer for you about who killed General Gau. But I have a good answer for who is in charge of the Conclave. It's you."

"That was Tarsem's job description, Oi. Not mine."

"With due respect to the moment and your grief, Councilor, the general is dead. The position is vacant. And it needs to be filled, immediately."

"And you don't think that's a thought that's not already occurred to several dozen representatives?"

"I know it has," Oi said. "I know that without even having to check with my analysts. And I know what an extended season of would-be General Gaus trying to claim his mantle would cost us."

"*You* take the job, then," I said. "You're better qualified for it."

"I'm not the right person for the job," Oi said. "No one would follow me."

"You have an entire directory of people who follow you."

"They follow the job, Councilor. I don't flatter myself that their loyalty extends to me."

"What makes you think it would extend to *me,* then?" I asked, and then waved again to the security detail. "Or their loyalty? Or anyone's?"

"Councilor, why do you think this security detail is *here*?" Oi asked. "This was General Gau's detail. It's yours now."

"I don't want the job."

"Think of who does. Think of who will, once it occurs to them that it's open."

"So you would have me take the job simply to avoid something worse."

"Yes," Oi said. "Although that would not be my main motivation."

"And what would be your main motivation?" I asked.

"To preserve the Conclave," Oi said. It motioned out, toward the Grand Assembly chamber. "Unli Hado wants the position for his own personal ambition, as would a dozen other representatives. Prulin Horteen would take it to settle scores, as would another dozen representatives. Ristin Lause, were it offered to her, and it wouldn't be, would take it out of the bureaucratic instinct to keep things running. None of them truly understand why the Conclave is more important than themselves or their immediate goal. In all three cases—in every case—it would end in ruin."

"It might buy time," I said.

"We have bought all the time we can buy, Councilor," Oi said. "The general has just paid for all of it. *There is no more time*. There are only the choices we have in front of us right now. You take control of the Conclave, or allow someone else to. One choice will preserve the union. The other won't."

"You have a lot of faith in me, Oi."

"I have absolutely no faith in you, Councilor," Oi said. "What I have is analysis. You don't think I haven't been modeling what would happen after the general left power, do you? Who would try to claim his position and what would happen from there?"

"No, I suppose that would be your job," I said. "Although I didn't expect to be part of that math."

"If anyone else said that I would call that false modesty," Oi said. "In your case it's not, I know. You've always been the one to walk behind, Councilor. But there is no one for you to walk behind anymore. The Conclave needs you to step forward."

I looked around the room, at the security detail there. All ready for something.

"I don't want the job," I repeated to Oi.

"I know," Oi said. "But with all due respect, Councilor, at the moment I don't care about what you *want*. I care about what you will *do*."

The security officer returned, a Lalan in tow.

"You're a medical doctor," I said.

"Yes," the Lalan said. "Dr. Omed Moor, ma'am."

"Well, Doctor?" I held out my arms. "Am I dead?"

"No, ma'am."

I put my arms down. "Then that's all the time I have for a checkup at the moment, I'm afraid. Thank you, Doctor." I turned from the bewildered doctor to Oi. "Does your analysis include you working on my behalf?"

"I serve at the pleasure of the leader of the Conclave," Oi said.

"And that's me."

"It has been since the moment of the general's death. All we have to do now is make it known."

"I have some people I need to see," I said. "And there are people you need to see too."

"I can guess who you want to see," Oi said.

"I'm sure you can."

"Do you still want my resignation?"

"If at the end of this sur I'm still in a position to accept it, no," I said. "And if I'm not, I'll assume it's because we're in the same airlock, waiting to be pushed out into space by whoever is."

• • •

"I question your right to call us here," Unli Hado said. "You are not General Gau. And the general did not leave instruction for passing on leadership of the Conclave to you. If anyone should be the leader of the Conclave now, it is Chancellor Lause."

Hado sat in the conference room next to Tarsem's public office, along with Lause, Prulin Horteen, Ohn Sca, and Oi.

"It's a fair point," I said, and turned to Lause. "Chancellor?"

"I'm leader of the Grand Assembly, not the leader of the Conclave," she said. "I neither want nor can accept that position."

"You're a coward," Hado said.

"No," Lause said. "But I'm not a fool, either. The Conclave has just lost its leader, Unli, and it's lost it to assassination. Are you so blinded by your own ambition that you don't realize that anyone claiming the general's title will look like the assassin's employer?"

Hado flung an arm at me. "And *she* won't?"

"No, I won't," I said. "Not if we come to terms now."

"I repeat: I question your right to call us here," Hado said.

"Oi," I said.

"Representative Hado, I have it on very excellent information that you are the one who authorized the assassination of General Gau," Oi said. "Evidence from the Abumwe report combined with my own agents' intelligence gathering lays it squarely at your door. Within the sur I expect that you will be arrested for treason and that a comprehensive report will show the Elpri government was providing logistical and material support not only for the assassination but for Equilibrium in general."

Hado stared, disbelieving. "That's a lie!"

"Don't protest too much, Hado," Horteen said.

Oi turned to her. "Prulin Horteen, I have evidence that you offered material support to Representative Hado for the assassination, and that

your recent rhetoric about purging nations you deemed traitorous to the Conclave is a feint to draw attention from your own involvement."

"What?" Horteen said.

"Representative Sca, your government's collusion with Hado's assassination of the general and with Equilibrium in general is exhaustively documented as well," Oi said.

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about," Sca said.

"I do," Hado said, turning to me. "This is a beheading of anyone who is in a position to oppose you."

"No," I said. "It's a precautionary measure against a trio of representatives who are a material threat to the unity of the Conclave at the moment of her greatest instability. Any of the three of you could shatter the Conclave, by your own ambition, by your own greed, or by your own stupidity. We are not four serti past the assassination of our leader. The Grand Assembly is in chaos. The representatives are utterly terrified. And if Vnac Oi had the three of you arrested on charges of assassination and conspiracy, I could have you all on the other side of an airlock by the end of the sur and no one would do anything but congratulate me on my decisiveness. I might even get a commendation from the chancellor for it."

"Indeed you might," Lause said. It was instructive to watch the reaction of Hado, Sca, and Horteen to that comment.

"And when the evidence eventually shows that the accusation was a flat-out lie?" Hado asked. "Because it will. Both Ocampo's and Abumwe's reports are out there for everyone to see and compare."

"Representative Hado, I'm deeply insulted," Oi said. "You apparently have so little faith in my ability to manipulate data to tell precisely the story I want it to tell."

"Why are you telling us this?" Sca said. "If this was your plan, why didn't you just have us arrested?"

"I didn't say it *was* my plan," I said. "It was my rebuttal to Representative Hado's questioning of my right to call you all here. I trust I've made it clear that at the moment *right* is not the correct frame of reference. I have the *power* to call you here. As I have the power to condemn you to death. I hope we understand each other."

"You want to make an example of us, then," Hado said.

"What I want, Representative Hado, is to save the Conclave," I said. "And offer you three the chance to increase your power and influence while doing so."

"By throwing us out of an airlock?" Horteen said.

"I have a better idea," I said. "And it is precisely this simple. Representative Horteen, you and Representative Hado have significant power bases among assembly members. They don't overlap. You two are to come to Chancellor Lause and together declare that for the good of the Conclave you ask that I take on the leadership role of the Conclave. Representative Sca, you will second that proposal. Horteen and Hado will deliver their blocs for the vote, Lause will take care of the rest, and Oi will handle any stragglers. This will happen tomorrow, by mid-sur."

"And if it doesn't?" Hado asked.

"Then you three will have a meeting with an airlock," Oi said.

Hado glanced over at Oi and then turned back to me. "You didn't have to threaten us," he said. "You could have just asked."

"Representative Hado, we've been doing so well being bracingly honest with each other," I said. "Let's not ruin it now."

"General Gau would never have negotiated with us this way," Horteen said.

I glanced over at Hado for this. "Yes, he would have," Hado said, to Horteen. "He simply would have had Sorvalh here to cover for him."

"The general is no longer with us," I said.

"Pity," Hado said.

"It is," I said. "How ironic, Representative Hado, that it took you until this very moment to recognize his value."

"Do we have a deal?" Oi asked.

"Do we have a choice?" Hado replied.

"You said this would increase our power," Horteen said. "I haven't heard the part where that happens."

"This is how," I said. "After the present crisis is over, and the stability of the Conclave is no longer in question, I will announce the formation of a task force to create and establish a succession plan for the leader of the Conclave, so that we have no more crises like the one we are now conspiring to avoid today. I will name the three of you, with the chancellor, to head the task force, and give you free reign to create the process, with only one condition: that the next leader of the Conclave *must* come from the Grand Assembly."

"Interesting," Horteen said.

"I thought you might see it that way," I said. Already I could see both Horteen and Hado starting to think how they could use such a task force to their own advantage. "Please note that this process will be for *after* I retire."

"But you do plan to retire," Hado said.

"Yes. Not soon, to be clear. But soon enough."

"And in the meantime you will still have this threat over our heads," Sca said.

"No," I said. "The threat dies when the Grand Assembly elects me leader of the Conclave, tomorrow."

"But only then," Oi said.

"And who do you place the blame on then, I wonder?" Hado asked. "For the death of the general?"

I felt a pang in that moment, for my friend and against my own conscience, for having to use his death so opportunistically. "Let that be my concern for now, Representative Hado."

"As you wish, Councilor," he said, and stood to rise, as did the others. "But it's not 'councilor' anymore, is it? What do we call you now?"

"I'll let you decide," I said. "Tomorrow."

They exited, except for Oi. I slumped, exhausted.

"Well done," Oi said to me.

"It was a basic threatening," I said, weakly. "Nothing I haven't done before."

"Possibly higher stakes this time."

"Yes, possibly," I said. "Thank you for coaching Lause for me."

"It might interest you to know I didn't, really," Oi said. "When I met with her I just asked her if she would follow your lead. Do you know what she said?"

"I don't know."

"She said, 'For the Conclave, I will.' And there you have it."

"Do you believe her?"

"I think she knows stability is the key to her keeping her job."

"And the other three?" I asked. "Do you think they'll keep the deal?"

"I don't doubt it," Oi said. "One of the nice things about my line of work is that people who don't know much about it have an infinite capacity to believe that I can do anything, including fabricate incriminating evidence out of thin air."

"And don't you?"

"It's not *infinite,*" Oi said. I smiled at this. "In any event they don't need to know that we were bluffing blind. And by the time they figure it out, it will be far too late. You have my assurance of that, Councilor."

"Thank you, Vnac," I said. "Now, would you send in our next two visitors."

Oi nodded and made its way to the antechamber, where the principals of my next meeting waited.

"Ambassador Abumwe, Ambassador Lowen," I said, as the two humans entered. "Thank you both for seeing me at such short notice."

"Councilor Sorvalh, please accept my condolences," Lowen said. "And the condolences of the governments I represent. This is a terrible day."

"Condolences from me and the Colonial Union as well," Abumwe said.

"Thank you both," I said, and motioned to the table. "Please sit."

They sat. Oi positioned itself in a corner, to observe. I stood, considering my two guests.

"Is everything all right, Councilor?" Lowen asked.

"Yes," I said, and smiled, slightly. "I apologize, ambassadors. I am trying to decide how to say what I have to say next."

"You told me earlier that you prize truthfulness," Abumwe said. "In spite of the environment in which we work. Perhaps at this moment truthfulness would be even more useful than usual."

"All right," I said. "Then here it is: By this time tomorrow I will be the ruler of the Conclave. The deal has already been made. It's not a role I would have asked for but it's one I need to take, for the stability of the Conclave."

"Understood," Abumwe said. Lowen nodded.

"One consequence of today's events is that the members of the Conclave will be looking to place blame for the assassination of General Gau. Time will eventually provide an answer but that won't stop the drive for a target in the short term. There are fundamentally two choices here: place blame internally, on a nation or nations within the Conclave, or place it externally."

"I can see where this is going," Abumwe said.

"You're not wrong, I imagine," I said. "But please let me finish. Understand, both of you, that at this very moment I have one priority: to keep the Conclave intact. There is nothing else that comes close to

that goal. At this moment, this means I cannot allow internal doubt, internal accusation, or internal blame, *even if it is correct to do so*."

"So you will blame us," Lowen said. "We humans."

"Yes," I said. "Officially."

"What does that mean?" Abumwe asked.

"It means that for the moment, the official response of the Conclave is to privilege the Ocampo report over your report. It means that we officially assume that the Colonial Union intends malicious action against the Conclave. It means that it is under suspicion with regard to the death of General Tarsem Gau. It means that although we will not declare that a state of war exists between our two governments, any future provocation from the Colonial Union will be met with the harshest appropriate response."

"It means you're using us as a scapegoat," Abumwe said.

"I'm not entirely familiar with that term but I can guess what it means. And yes."

"You understand that the Equilibrium group will use this as an excuse to make attacks that appear to be from the Colonial Union."

"Yes, of course."

"Then you understand what my next concern will be," Abumwe said.

I nodded at Lowen. "Perhaps you wish to have further discussion on this topic privately. Ambassador Lowen does not need to be read in for this part."

"It's too late for that now, don't you think."

"All right," I said. "You know I have a back channel open to the Colonial Union. Director Oi here," I nodded to Vnac, "will be keeper of that channel. If the Colonial Union is genuinely interested in avoiding a war with us, Ambassador, then it will consider continuing the free sharing of information between us. It won't change the Conclave's official position on the Colonial Union for now.

Unofficially it will help me keep the warmongers in the Grand Assembly in line. We understand each other, I trust."

"And what about Earth?" Lowen asked.

"I can't give the Colonial Union the slightest provocation or excuse for an attack," I said, turning to her. "Or allow any other group to use such as cover for attack. I am withdrawing our diplomats from Earth and expelling yours from Conclave headquarters. Existing agreements on trade and lend-lease ships will be followed to their precise letter and no more. Don't expect any further for the time being."

"That puts you in a bad position with us in respect to the Colonial Union," Lowen said. "Without your trade and material support, a number of our governments will start to look favorably at the CU again."

"I don't have any choice in the matter," I said. "Until things are settled I can't allow humanity to be a distraction to the Conclave." I turned to Abumwe. "With that said, let it be known that if the Colonial Union takes any hostile action against the Earth, the Conclave will assume the Colonial Union is doing so in order to build up its military and colonial populations, with the intent of attacking the Conclave and setting up new colonies. I don't think I have to tell you what our response will be."

"We have no intention of attacking the Earth," Abumwe said.

"Attacking the Earth *again,*" I said. "Our official point of view, Ambassador. For now."

"I can't say that I'm happy with this choice."

"I don't need you to be happy with it, Ambassador. I would like for you to understand why it's necessary."

Abumwe turned to Lowen. "And you? What's going to be the Earth's official position on Equilibrium?"

"I couldn't tell you," Lowen said. "We only just found out it existed. Or that you allege that it *does* exist. I'll take your information

back to Earth with me, of course, and share it. You can expect a high amount of skepticism."

"I understand. But if I may ask, what do you think, Ambassador Lowen? Privately."

Lowen looked at me before continuing. "I would very much like to believe the Colonial Union had nothing to do with the destruction of Earth Station. I would very much like to believe that it means us no harm. But I don't know if we can *trust* the Colonial Union, Ambassador. As much as I would like to. I don't see it happening."

"Perhaps we'll find a way to earn it," Abumwe said.

"I know a way you can start," Lowen said.

"Tell me."

"My ship blew up," Lowen said. "And I've just been told that we can't stay here to wait for another one to arrive. I could use a ride home."

• • •

"The humans are off?" I asked Oi, as it came up to me. I was in the Lalan park. I was taking my last few minutes of peace in what was likely to be a very long time.

"A serti ago," it said. "The *Chandler* was rather crowded, as I understand it. They are going to Earth first to drop off Lowen and her team. Then I understand they are back to Phoenix Station."

"Understood."

"Not necessarily a very good idea to let them spend more time together," Oi said. "The two varieties of human. Our people have a hard enough time making a distinction between them."

"I'm not sure we had a choice," I said. "We needed them all away, sooner than later."

"We found it, by the way," Oi said. "The weapon that attacked the *Odhiambo*."

"What was it?"

"A very interesting new toy. A particle beam weapon, heavily cloaked in material that scatters electromagnetic radiation. We literally ran into it, otherwise we wouldn't have found it. The weapon had no particular manufacturing marks on it but my analysts guessed it might be human manufacture."

"The Colonial Union?"

"Or these Equilibrium people, borrowing their designs. We'll figure it out, but at the moment your guess is as good as mine. We figure either it was skipped in just before the *Odhiambo,* or it's been sitting out there for a while, waiting for a target."

"Are you looking for more of them?"

"We are now," Oi said. "You'll understand when I say they're hard to find. When you're elected leader you might authorize some more resources to the task."

"Indeed. And, how is the vote going?"

"It's going uneventfully," Oi said. "You will be elected leader of the Conclave in just a few ditu, I expect. It would have been done sooner but some of the representatives can't vote without making a speech."

"How hard did you have to work to change minds?"

"Not as hard as I might have in any other circumstance," Oi said. "People are still in shock about the general. They know who you were to him. Many of them are voting for you as a final way to honor him."

"That's a sentiment that would amuse Tarsem," I said.

"I'm sure," Oi said. "Not that I didn't have to threaten a couple of representatives, of course. But, again, fewer than I might have to otherwise."

"I'll need their names."

"You'll have them. Try not to have them killed."

"I'm more subtle than that."

"You'll have them killed later, you mean."

"I won't have them killed at all. Just their careers."

"When the vote is final they will want you to speak to the Grand Assembly."

"Of course," I said. "I'll be ready. Thank you, Oi. That will be all."

"One more thing," Oi said, and produced in its tendrils a paper envelope. "A letter."

"From whom?"

"From the general," it said. "He gave it to me in our last meeting. He asked me to hold it and to give it to you, after his speech. He told me I would know when to give it to you." It held it out to me. "I think it's all right to give it to you now."

I took the letter. "I assume you read it," I said.

"In fact that is the one piece of information on this entire asteroid that I have not read."

"Remarkable," I said, looking at the envelope. "How did *that* happen, I wonder."

"Simple. The general asked me not to." Oi nodded and departed.

I opened the envelope and read the letter inside.

Hello, Hafte.

First I will apologize. If you are reading this, you are now leader of the Conclave. I know it's not a position you wanted for yourself, and if you resent me a little for making you take it I understand. But also understand that I can't imagine that the next leader of the Conclave would be anyone but you. You have too long contented yourself to be the advisor and the councilor. It's not that I did not value your advice and counsel. But I always understood that your talents were not being used to their best extent, either by yourself or the Conclave. Now they will be. I hope you can forgive me for giving you that final push.

Not too long ago you and I sat in the Lalan park and you told me the story of Loomt Both and how he almost doomed the

Lalans to extinction. You said to me that it was best for your people to have their pain early, to grow into their wisdom. I have come to believe the same is true for the Conclave. We had growing pains, rebellions, and loss. But none of these events have fixed the Conclave, changed it from a disparate collection of peoples into a single, galvanized nation. It needs something to be that catalyst.

If you are reading this, then you know what that catalyst was.

I set the letter down, trying to make sense of what I had just read. I looked around the park, and saw nothing but greenery, and a single young Lalan, mindlessly swimming in the pond. After a few moments I started reading again.

You were right. When the Conclave was an idea, and when it was growing, I was the right leader for it. But I'm not the right leader for it now. It needs someone else, someone with a cannier set of political skills. Someone like you. But neither can I simply step away and fade into the background. We both know there are those in the Grand Assembly who would have no intention of allowing me to pick my own successor. The process would be drawn out and messy and at the end of it I would be what you feared I would become—just another politician, who left the stage long after he should have.

Instead I choose to become something else: A symbol. A legend. A martyr to the Conclave. And, to be less precious about it, a bludgeon for you to pummel anyone who dares to get out of line, for a good long time now. I've given you a tool to build the founding myth of the Conclave—to set it on a path toward wisdom rather than dissolution. I trust that you will know how to do it. You would know how to do it better than I would.

Now, as to the matter of my death. I am reasonably certain that Vnac Oi has suspicions; it is very good at its job. I am also

reasonably certain that it has no intention of delving too deeply into the mystery, or rather, will be content to pin it on some conveniently unprovable set of circumstances. This will leave you, and only you, to know the true nature of events. The only accounting of it is in this letter. What you do with this knowledge is entirely your choice. From my point of view there is no wrong answer. But I think you know what I would suggest you do. At least for now.

There is nothing left to say other than this: I wish I could be there to see you do what will come next. I cannot. Instead I will take comfort in knowing that you will be the one to finish our work. To set the Conclave's future in stone.

I wish you joy in the work, my dear Hafte.

Tarsem

I stared at the letter for a good long while, seeing the page but not reading the words.

Then slowly, deliberately, I tore the letter into pieces as small as I could make them and tossed them into the pond.

The paper drank in the water of the pond, turning to bits of pulp, and the ink on the individual torn shreds of letter spread and ran, obliterating any chance of legibility. After several moments there was nothing left of the letter but my memory of it.

"Madam Premier," Oi said, behind me.

I turned and saw it, along with Umman, my assistant.

"'Madam Premier.' So that is my title now," I mused.

"It is, Madam Premier," Umman said.

"Your presence is requested in the Grand Assembly chamber," Oi said. "The Grand Assembly would acknowledge you as the Conclave's leader."

"I would be pleased to see it," I said.

“They have also asked if you would speak to them.”

“If they wish.”

“May I tell them what you will say?”

“Yes,” I said. “You may tell them that I intend to say the following: The union is preserved.”

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To the production staff of Tor Books and at all my other publishers. Thank you for making me look good.

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PART ONE

It was Tuesday, and we had to murder a revolution.

"It *is* Tuesday, yeah?" Terrell Lambert asked. There were four of us in the squad for this mission, and we waited, slowly circling, in a shuttle twenty-five klicks above the planet surface.

In one way, it was a reasonable question. Days fade into each other in the Colonial Defense Forces, especially when you're traveling from one mission to the next. One day is very much like another on a starship, there are no real "days off." Tracking days might make sense if you were waiting for your term of service to end, but recently we'd been made aware that our terms of service were likely to be extended indefinitely. This is what happens when your sole source of soldiers has been taken from you and you have no way to get any more anytime soon.

That being the case, tracking specific days didn't make a whole lot of sense. Was it Tuesday? It might be. Did it matter that it was Tuesday? Not as much as it might otherwise.

In another way it was a ridiculous question because every CDF soldier has a computer called a BrainPal in their head. The BrainPal is a marvelous piece of equipment that can tell you instantly what day it is, what time it is, what the ambient temperature around you is, and every

single mission spec—along with, really, anything else you might want or need, information-wise.

Lambert knew exactly what day it was, or could know. He wasn't asking as a point of information. He was making an existentialist point about the nature of a life in the Colonial Defense Forces. It's worth saying that it's doubtful that Lambert was specifically intending to bring attention to the existential nature of his question. That didn't mean it wasn't there.

Also, he asked because he was bored, waiting for our mission to begin. Boredom also happened a lot in the Colonial Defense Forces.

"Yeah, it's Tuesday," Sau Salcido replied. "Ask me how I know."

"Because of your BrainPal?" Ilse Powell asked.

"No. Because yesterday was Pizza Day in the *Tubingen* mess. Pizza Day is always Monday. Therefore: It's Tuesday."

"That messes me up," Lambert said.

"That it's Tuesday?" Salcido asked.

"No, that Monday is Pizza Day. Back on Earth I was a custodian at an elementary school. Pizza Day was always on Friday. The teachers used it to keep the kids in line. 'Behave yourself or you don't get pizza on Friday.' Having Monday be Pizza Day subverts the natural order of things."

"You know what's worse than that," Powell said. "That *Tubingen*'s mess serves tacos on Wednesday."

"When it should be on Tuesday," Salcido said.

"Right, 'Taco Tuesday.' It's *right there*."

"Well, only in English," Salcido pointed out. "If you speak Spanish, for example, it's '*martes de tacos,*' which isn't alliterative at all. I *think* it's '*martes de tacos.*' I could be messing up the translation."

"You could just check with your BrainPal," Lambert said.

"And you could have checked with your BrainPal about what day it is, so what's your point."

"At the school we always had tacos on Thursday," Lambert said, changing the subject.

"Why would you do that?" Powell asked.

"Why wouldn't you? It's still a day that starts with a 't'."

"In English," Salcido interjected.

"In English," Lambert continued. "It's still alliterative."

"*Technically* it's alliterative," Powell said. "Functionally a 'th' sound and a hard 't' aren't alliterative at all."

"Sure they are."

"'*Thhhhhhhh*,'" Powell hissed. "It's nothing like 't'."

"You're reaching," Lambert said.

"Help me out here," Powell said, to Salcido.

"She's got a point," Salcido said, to Lambert.

"'Taco Thursday' still makes more sense than 'Pizza Monday,'" Lambert said.

"Only in English," Salcido said. "In Spanish it's *lunes.* So '*lunes de pizza.*' Which kind of makes sense."

"That doesn't make sense at all," Lambert said. "Not even a little bit."

"Sure it does," Salcido said. "There's that old song. 'When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore.' '*Lunes*' comes from 'luna,' which is moon. So there you go."

"I have never once heard of this song," Powell said. "You just made it up. This is a thing you just made up to win an argument."

"Agreed," Lambert said.

"I did not."

"It's complete bullshit."

"No."

"Vote," Lambert said. His hand went up. So did Powell's. "The motion passes. It's bullshit."

"I said it was an old song," Salcido protested.

"Lieutenant," Lambert said, "you've never heard of this pizza moon song, have you?"

"I am not being drawn into your stupid argument," I said. "Or more accurately, *another* of your stupid arguments."

"The lieutenant has never heard of your pizza moon song either," Lambert said to Salcido. "And she was a musician. She would know."

"There are a lot of different types of musicians," Salcido said, only a little defensively.

A notification pinged in my view. "They're done talking," I said, to my squad. "We're on. Forty-five seconds. Suit up." I grabbed my gear, which in this case included a nanobot pack, a drone, and my Empee rifle.

"When we get back to the *Tubingen* I'm going to find that song," Salcido said, grabbing his own gear. "I'm going to find it and I'm going to make all of you listen to it. You'll see. You'll *all* see."

"Masks," I said. I signaled my combat unitard to create a mask, covering my face. It crept up my head, obscuring my view until my BrainPal offered up a visual feed.

"What's for lunch today?" Lambert asked, through his BrainPal, because his mouth was now snugly covered, like everyone else's.

"Hamburgers," Salcido said. "Because it's Tuesday."

The shuttle door opened, exposing us to the frigid temperatures of the upper atmosphere of Franklin.

"Out you go," I said to the three. They jumped out of the shuttle without further prompting. I counted off thirty and then jumped out of the shuttle myself.

Franklin was close to the size and mass of the Earth, basically perfect for human life, and was one of the first few planets colonized, back in the early days of the Colonial Union. It was densely populated, with citizens whose ancestry ranged from first-wave North American colonists to recent refugees from the Indonesian civil war, most of them

on the large, thin continent of Pennsylvania, which dominated the northern hemisphere. There were a number of provinces and sub-provinces, but New Philadelphia, the city above which I now found myself, was the home of the planet's global government.

The global government which was, in a matter of minutes, about to vote on a bill to declare independence from the Colonial Union.

My BrainPal alerted me to the location of the other three members of my squad, some thousands of meters below me. They had a different mission objective than I did, although we were all headed for the same place: the global capitol building, affectionately (or perhaps not so affectionately) called "the glass slipper." It was named so because the architect gave it a swooping, rising profile that vaguely resembled a shoe—*very* vaguely in my opinion—and because the building was clad in a transparent, glass-like material, designed, or so the architect said, to be a metaphor for the transparency of the Franklin government itself.

The primary entrance to the Franklin capitol was a large, open arch that led into a rotunda from which, if you looked up, you could see the shoes of the global representatives, because on the highest level of the "slipper" was the legislative chamber, which boasted a lovely, sloping roof and a transparent floor which looked down into the rotunda. It was my understanding that it wasn't until the construction that someone pointed out that the transparent floor meant visitors could look up and see the underwear (or not) of the legislators wearing open leg coverings like skirts and kilts, at which point piezoelectric opaquing elements were added to the floor at considerable additional expense. Someone also neglected to consider the fact that a large room whose walls were entirely composed of transparent elements might turn into something of a greenhouse during warmer months, leading to several early heat prostration events before the air-conditioning to the legislative chamber was improved.

Another thing no one had considered: that placing one's global legislative chamber at the very top of a transparent building might make it uniquely vulnerable to attack from above. But then, with the exception of a single incursion by the Conclave right after the Colonial Union's attack on their fleet at Roanoke, Franklin, as one of the core planets of the Colonial Union, hadn't been meaningfully attacked by an alien species in decades. And by the Colonial Union itself, never. Why would it have been? It was a constituent part *of* the Colonial Union.

Until, possibly, today.

"We're down," Powell said to me. That meant that the three of them had landed and were heading toward the capitol rotunda, bristling with weapons and general menace. The idea was for them to draw the capitol security force—such as it was—to them, and to cause a lockdown of the legislative chamber, sealing all 751 representatives inside the room.

Which was where I was going.

I signaled to the *Tubingen,* the CDF ship on which I was stationed, that I was ready to begin. The *Tubingen* was currently floating directly above New Philadelphia. Normally Franklin's planetary sensors would have spotted the *Tubingen* after it had skipped in literally (and dangerously) close to the planet's upper atmosphere. The problem was that the planet's sensor apparatus—from its satellites to its ground stations—were designed, installed, and still largely operated by, the Colonial Union. If the Colonial Union doesn't want a ship to be seen, it won't be. Someone would have to be looking directly for it to see it. And why would they be looking directly for it if the sensors didn't say it was there?

The *Tubingen* acknowledged my hail and reported that it would begin in ten seconds, and that I should keep clear the beam. I agreed with this and acknowledged the warning. The capitol building was directly below me now. My BrainPal lit up a column that represented the incoming beam. If I were to wander into the path of the beam I

might be uncomfortable just long enough for my brain to register the pain before I was turned into a floating pile of carbon dust. That was not on my schedule for the day. I kept myself well clear of its path.

A few seconds later my BrainPal visualized the high-energy beam, pulsing on and off faster than my eye could register, vaporizing a three-meter hole in the roof of the legislative chamber one micrometer at a time. The goal was to create the hole without shattering the roof or vaporizing the legislators directly below the beam. At this juncture of the mission we didn't want anyone dead.

Path cleared, I thought. *Time to make an impression.*

"Here we go," I said out loud, found the hole, and dove for it. I waited for the last few seconds to deploy my nanobots into a parachute form, braking with an abruptness that would have killed an unmodified human body. Fortunately, I don't have an unmodified human body.

As it was, I dropped through the hole with enough velocity to make an impression, and to make my combat unitard stiffen to protect me from the impact.

There was a thump, and a mess, and a general cry of confusion as I seemingly appeared from nowhere. I raised myself up from impact position, looked at the elderly gentleman stunned to see me, and smiled. I had landed on the speaker's podium, directly behind his desk, exactly where I had planned to. It's nice when a bit of political theater such as the one I was about to attempt starts out so well.

"Speaker Haryanto," I said, to the startled man. "A genuine pleasure to meet you. Excuse me for just one second." I reached behind me, took the drone off of my back, and activated it via my BrainPal. It whirred to life and rose directly above my head. While it was doing so, I looked down through the floor—the speaker was wearing pants and had opted to keep his podium transparent, though tinted—and saw Powell, Lambert, and Salcido, weapons up, drones deployed, cautiously

being encroached on by capitol security. They weren't in any particular danger, or at least any that they couldn't handle.

That done, I unstrapped my Empee, placed it on the speaker's desk, and invited myself to the microphone, into which Speaker Haryanto had been intoning mere seconds earlier. I had my BrainPal pop up the notes I made earlier, because I knew I would have to give a speech.

"Speaker Haryanto, representatives of the Franklin global government, and all the citizens of Franklin who are watching this singular legislative event, at home or wherever you may be, greetings," I began. "I am Lieutenant Heather Lee of the Colonial Defense Forces. I do apologize for my abrupt and unscheduled entrance to your session today, but time was of the essence. I bring you a message from the Colonial Union.

"The Colonial Union knows that today—in fact, right now—this chamber has begun a vote to declare independence from the Colonial Union. We also know that this vote is hotly contested, and is likely to be very close. This is for good reason, as your independence would leave you vulnerable to the predations of any number of alien species who are even now watching, as we are, the result of your vote.

"Through standard channels the Colonial Union has made the government of Franklin aware that we are opposed to this vote. We feel it is dangerous not only to the people and government of Franklin, but also to the Colonial Union at large. We also maintain that such a vote is illegal and that Franklin may not, through legal means, separate itself from the Colonial Union. These points have proved to be unpersuasive to many of you, hence this vote that Speaker Haryanto was about to commence.

"You may believe that I have come here to stop this vote on behalf of the Colonial Union. I have not. The representatives of Franklin, or at least the minority required to bring this vote to the floor, have asked

for this vote. The Colonial Union will allow it to proceed. What I am here to do is make you aware of the consequences of this action."

I paused for effect, just long enough to make them wonder about the consequences, and then began again. "During the lead up to this historic vote, some of you in this chamber—in a manner you believe fitting, given that the name of this colony is taken from the United States of America revolutionary figure Benjamin Franklin—have quoted the United States' Declaration of Independence, and specifically how you, like those revolutionaries who signed that document, would pledge your lives, your fortunes, and your sacred honors to your own independence.

"Very well."

I pointed to the drone hovering above my head. "As I have been speaking to you, this drone has identified and targeted every representative in this room, and has fed the information to a Colonial Union ship, which by now has trained high-energy particle weapons on each of you. As the Colonial Union has already declared that this vote is illegal, if and when you vote for independence, you will be offering up an act of treason to the Colonial Union. In doing so, you will lose your sacred honor.

"As you will be committing treason, the Colonial Union will freeze all your financial accounts, to restrict your ability, or the ability of others, to commit further treason with them. So you will lose your fortunes. And once you vote, confirming your treason, you will be summarily sentenced to death by the Colonial Union, with the sentence to be carried out immediately; as I said you are already tracked and targeted. So you will lose your life.

"Now, then," I said, turning back to Speaker Haryanto. "You may proceed with your vote."

"After you have threatened all of us with death?" Haryanto said, incredulously.

"Yes," I said. "Or more precisely, after the Colonial Union agreed with the principles you have already set out—that this action was worth your life, fortune, and honor. What you may not have expected is that it would cost all these things as quickly as it will. But these are not the days of the American Revolution, and the Colonial Union is not the British Empire, an ocean and several months away. We are here now. It's time to find out who among you is willing to make the sacrifice for independence that you have declared you will make. Time to find out who means what they say, and who was simply posturing because you thought your posturing was consequence free—or at least, consequence free for *you*."

"But you won't give us our independence even if we vote for it!" someone yelled from the floor.

"Is this a *surprise* to you?" I asked. "Did you not think there would be a struggle to follow? Did you not believe the words you said? Or did you believe the repercussions of your actions would be shouldered by others—by the citizens who will be pressed into service to defend the so-called independence you wish to give them? The fellow citizens of Franklin who will die by the millions as other species claim this planet for their own when the Colonial Union is not here to defend it? Where did you think *you* would be when that happened? Why did you think *you* would not be asked to answer for your vote?

"No, my dear representatives of Franklin. You are being given an opportunity. You will be called to answer for your actions *before* any other citizen of Franklin. You will not evade this responsibility, as much as you may wish it. Your vote is being broadcast across this globe. You cannot hide now. You *will* not hide now. You will vote your conscience. And your fellow citizens will find out now whether you believe their so-called independence is worth *your* life."

"So, let's begin," I said, and nodded to Haryanto. "You first, speaker."

• • •

"We're off the clock now, yeah?" Lambert asked.

"Since we're on the shuttle back up to the *Tubingen,* I would say yes," Salcido said.

"Then let me question the usefulness of that last stunt of ours."

"I don't know," Powell said. "The declaration of independence was unanimously defeated, the entire planet of Franklin got to see its legislators revealed as cowards looking after their own skin, and *we* didn't die. I thought it was pretty successful."

"I didn't say it wasn't successful," Lambert said. "I said I question its usefulness."

"I don't see the difference," Salcido said.

"The success of the mission depends on whether we achieve our mission goals. We did that—like Ilse said we killed the vote, embarrassed the politicians, didn't get killed, and reminded the entire planet that the Colonial Union can come along and stomp them anytime it wants, so don't screw with us. Which wasn't explicitly in our mission parameters but was the subtext of the mission."

"Wow, 'subtext,'" Powell said. "For a former janitor you're using big words there, Terrell."

"This former janitor has a rhetoric degree, asshole," Lambert said, and Powell smiled at this. "He just learned he could make more money as a janitor than as an adjunct professor. So yes. Successful. Great. But did it address the root causes? Did it address the underlying issues that required us to have to take the mission in the first place?"

"One, probably not, and two, do we care?" Powell asked.

"We should care," Lambert said. "We should care because if we didn't, then one day we'll be back here dealing with this problem again."

"I don't know about that," Salcido said. "We stomped on that vote pretty hard."

"And we did it with a single fireteam," Powell said, and then pointed at me. "Plus the fact that the Colonial Union sent a mere lieutenant to deal with a vote of global consequence probably said something. No offense, Lieutenant."

"None taken," I said.

"The whole point of the mission was to shake their confidence and make them consider their action," Powell continued. "The Colonial Union was saying 'Look what we can do with four common soldiers, so think about what we could do with more—and think about what we're protecting you from.'"

"But it doesn't address root causes," Lambert said, again. "Look, the global legislature of an entire planet doesn't wake up one morning and decide to vote for independence just for the fun of it. There was a lot going on before that point. Things we don't know about because while it was all brewing, we were off doing other things."

"Right," Powell said. "And when the aftermath of this comes down, we'll also be off again, doing other things, so why are you worked up about it?"

"I'm not worked up about it," Lambert said. "I'm just asking if our so-called 'successful' mission actually helped."

"It helped the Franklins," Salcido said. "The ones who didn't want independence, anyway."

"Also the ones who didn't want to get shot for treason," Powell interjected.

"Them too," Salcido agreed.

"Right, but I'm not convinced it helped the Colonial Union," Lambert said. "The reasons the Franklins wanted independence, whatever they are, are still there. They haven't been addressed."

"Not our job," Powell said.

"No, it's not. I just wish whosever job it was had done it before we got there."

"If they had then we wouldn't have been there," Powell said. "We would have been somewhere else and you would be trying to find deeper meaning about *that*."

"So you're saying the real problem is me," Lambert said.

"I'm not saying the real problem *isn't* you," Powell said. "Me, I'm just glad to get through the thing alive. Call me uncomplicated."

"Uncomplicated."

"Thank you. And you, Terrence, should stop overthinking the mission. Do it, get it done, go home. You'll be happier."

"I don't know about that," Lambert said.

"Fine, then I'll be happier, because I won't have to listen to you go on."

"You'll miss it when I'm gone."

"Maybe," Powell said. "I'm willing to find out."

"Found it!" Salcido said.

"Found what?" Lambert asked.

"That song. The song you said didn't exist."

"The pizza moon song?" Powell asked.

"Bullshit," Lambert said.

"Not bullshit!" Salcido exclaimed, triumphantly. "I'm putting it through the shuttle speakers now."

The cabin of the shuttle was filled a song about moons, pizza, drool, and pasta.

"This is a *terrible* song," Powell said, after a minute.

"It makes me hungry," Lambert said.

Salcido smiled. "The good news is, we'll be back in time for lunch."

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PART TWO

Wednesday—not one immediately following the events of Franklin—and we were hunting a sniper.

"Just drop the building on him," Powell suggested, from behind our cover. She pointed to the apartment complex the rebel sniper had been using to take aim at the Kyoto security forces and the CDF that had been deployed to assist them. We were in Fushimi, the planet's third-largest city and the center of recent unrest.

"We can't," I said.

"Sure we can," Powell said. She pointed upward. "The *Tubingen* could level that entire building in six seconds. Pancake it into rubble. Sniper's dead, we're back on the ship in time for tacos."

"And then have the Kyotans pissed off at us because several hundred of their people are homeless, surrounding buildings are damaged or possibly destroyed, infrastructure compromised, plus a big pile of shattered apartment complex dead in the middle of the street," Lambert pointed out.

"You're doing that thing where you think you're thinking about long-term implications again, aren't you, Lambert."

"I'm pointing out flattening the building might be unsubtle and not the best course of action."

“I prefer to think of it as a Gordian knot type of solution,” Powell said.

“The Gordian knot wasn’t twelve stories high,” Lambert countered. “With lots of people living in it.”

There was a sharp crack and the whirr of masonry shearing off a building forty meters up the road. The Kyoto security officers who had been peeking their heads around it very quickly unpeeked.

“He should have hit them from that distance,” Salcido said, unimpressed.

I motioned to the several dead Kyoto officers in the road in front of us. “He’s accurate enough,” I said. “Or she.”

“He or she’d be a lot less accurate with several stories of apartment building falling on their heads,” Powell said.

“We’re not destroying the building,” I said. “Get it out of your head.”

“Well, what do you want to do then, boss?” Salcido said.

I craned up to look at the building again. It was your basic concrete block sort of apartment complex. The complex had several corner and near-corner apartments that the sniper could use as vantage points for the road we were on. The apartments were difficult to see into visually and heat scanning wasn’t turning up anything; this sniper was using camo that made them difficult to spot across the whole electromagnetic spectrum. Or was wearing a nice insulating jacket.

“We could land a squad on the roof,” Powell said. “Flush out the asshole.”

“If I were the sniper I’d have wired the roof,” I said.

“How much destructive power do you think this sniper has?”

“I’m willing to err on the side of caution, here.”

“So he can blow up the building but we can’t,” Powell said. “Well, that’s just perfect.”

"The point is to have no one blow up the building," I said. "Suggest some other options, please."

"Track for movement," Salcido said. "Plug him the next time he takes a shot."

"This differs from what we've been doing how?" Lambert said. "You can argue about whether this guy is a good shot, but he's at least pretty good at not being *seen* until he takes a shot. And unless our return shot is immediate, we're not going to hit him."

"But we *can* track the shot," I said. "I mean if the sniper takes a shot, our BrainPals can track its trajectory."

"As long as we're looking in the right place, sure, I guess," Salcido said.

"We'd still have to return fire almost instantly," Lambert said.

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe not."

Lambert and Salcido looked at each other. "You're being cryptic, Lieutenant."

I looked at Salcido. "You're the resident Empee expert," I said.

"This is true," he said, and he was. He could tell you trivia about the CDF's standard rifle that you didn't know you didn't care about until he told it to you. "And?"

"The Empee builds its load on the fly out of nanobotic material."

"Right," Salcido said. "Keeps us from having to carry around six different types of weapons or ammo."

"Okay," I said. "I want to use the rocket launcher function, and I want to specify the payload of the rocket. Can I do that?"

"As long as the payload of the rocket is something that can be assembled almost instantly from the ammunition block, sure."

"Then I want you to make a payload of trackers," I said. "Tiny little trackers. The size of dust mites."

Salcido looked at me quizzically for a couple of seconds until the light went on. "Oh, okay. Got it."

"Can you do that?"

"Theoretically yes," Salcido said. "Practically, it would take me more time than we have to make an original design. I'm looking to see if there's anything on file that would work for our purposes."

"You have five minutes," I said.

"Of course, because any more time would make this too easy."

"I missed a step," Lambert said.

"I'm still for flattening the building," said Powell.

"Quiet," I said to Powell. And turned to Lambert. "We can track the shot but you said we'd have a problem accurately returning fire. And we don't want to blow up the building." I glanced back at Powell for this. "So rather than aiming *for* the sniper, we send a rocket filled with trackers into the apartment he's shooting out of."

"It busts open, covers the asshole with trackers, and then it doesn't matter where he goes, we know where he is," Powell said.

"Right," I said. "And we don't have to hit him head on, we just have to have him dusted."

"Found it!" Salcido said. "I've got something that should work. Building up a round now."

"So now all we have to do is wait for the next shot," Lambert said.

"We're not going to wait," I said. "We're going to draw his fire."

"How do you suggest we do that?"

I motioned to my combat unitard. "These should be good for one round."

"You're going to go out there and let the asshole take a shot at you," Lambert said.

"I didn't say it was going to be *me,*" I replied.

"Well, I'm sure as shit not volunteering," Powell said.

"For once I'm with Ilse." Lambert jabbed a thumb at his squad mate.

"Sau?" I asked.

"You want me to build this Frankenstein rocket *and* take a slug to the head? Come on, boss. Cut me some slack here."

"I'm the officer here," I pointed out.

"And we're all super inspired by your leadership, Lieutenant," Powell said. "We'll be right behind you."

"Emphasis on 'behind,'" Lambert said.

I looked at the both of them. "When we get back to the ship we're going to have a little talk about military chain of command."

"We're looking forward to having that conversation if you survive, Lieutenant," Powell promised.

"We might have it with me on one side of an airlock and the three of you on the other."

"Seems fair," Lambert said.

"Locked and loaded," Salcido said, to me. "I'm already tracking the bots. Ready when you are."

"Fine," I said. I turned to Powell and Lambert. "You two make like you're laying down fire for me as I make my way up the road. With any luck that asshole will miss me when he takes his shot. Be watching the building for the shot. Sync with each other and with Sau so you can triangulate. It will give Sau a better target for the rocket. Sau, call it in and let them know what we're up to."

"Got it."

"We'll keep him busy," Lambert said. Powell nodded.

I had my combat unitard cover my face, loped out from behind cover, and started hoofing it up the street, Lambert and Powell's cover fire rattling behind me.

I made it about forty meters before I was hit by a truck.

Colonial Defense Forces combat unitards are amazing things. They look like something you'd wear if you were performing Swan Lake, but the fabric, designed with the Colonial Union's trademarked nanobotic trickery, protects its wearer better than anything short of a foot of steel.

Probably better, since steel would fragment and spall and send shrapnel into your guts. The unitard doesn't do that. It stiffens on projectile impact and dissipates the energy it receives, up to a point. It's usually good for keeping your ass alive for a single direct hit of, say, a sniper's bullet.

But that doesn't mean you don't feel the hit.

I felt it just fine. Felt the stiffening of the unitard make it feel as if my ribs were cracking, and they might have been, felt my feet lift up off the road, felt my body fly backward through the air a few yards and then crumple into a heap as gravity took hold again.

All of which was according to plan. There was a reason I ran straight on into the sniper's sights. I wanted him to hit me center mass, where the unitard was best equipped to take the shot without killing me outright. If the sniper had been ambitious, he could have tried for a headshot, which I probably could have survived, but I wouldn't have been happy or mobile for several days afterward.

But Salcido was right. The sniper wasn't all that good. I figured—hoped might be the better word—that he'd go for the bigger, easier target. And he did.

Still hurt like hell.

I heard the *poomp* and hiss of Salcido's rocket fizzing toward the sniper's position, followed a few seconds later by a dull pop and the sound of glass shattering.

"Rocket hit," Salcido said, talking to me through my BrainPal. "You alive, Lieutenant?"

"It's debatable," I said. "You tracking?"

"Yeah. Sending the feed over the squad channel."

"That asshole still have a gun to my head?"

"No, he's on the move now."

I rolled and called up the squad feed and looked up at the building. The sniper was visible as a superimposed pattern of tiny dots, each

representing a single, mite-size tracker. He was currently moving from one apartment to another.

"We going in after him?" Lambert asked.

"We don't have to," I said. "We just have to wait for him to position himself to take another shot. Then we take him."

"How are we going to get him to take another shot?"

"Easy," I said, and stood up.

"Your suit's not going to take another direct hit," Powell said.

"Then maybe the three of you should kill the shit out of him before he gets the chance to take another shot," I said.

"On it."

"Good." I stood there in the street, watching the pixelated sniper settle into another apartment, a floor below his previous one, and over the course of a couple of minutes, carefully position himself by a window to take another shot at me.

"Got you," I said.

The apartment building exploded.

More than a hundred meters away, I was knocked back by the crack of the pressure wave and then by the rush of heat and flying debris.

"What the *fuck* just happened?" I heard Salcido yell, followed by Powell and Lambert yelling at each other to get back. I rolled again, then looked up and saw a dirty wall of dust rolling toward me from the collapsing concrete. I ducked my head and held my breath despite my mouth being covered by my mask, and filtering my air for me.

After a minute the worst of the dust cleared and I stood up. There was a pile of rubble where the apartment building used to stand.

"Fuck," I said.

"Wasn't that what we *didn't* want?" I heard Lambert yell, via my ears rather than my BrainPal. I looked back and saw him, Powell, and Salcido walking up on me.

"It looks like what we wanted and what the higher-ups wanted were two different things," Powell said. "I told you we should have just called it in. We could have saved ourselves some trouble."

"Shut up, Ilse," I said, and she shut up. I turned to Salcido. "Find out if there was anyone in the building besides the sniper."

"I'm pretty sure it was cleared out before we even got here."

"Make sure," I said. "If there are any civilians in there, we start digging them out."

"You've got to be kidding me," Lambert said. I turned to him to snap his head off for complaining about rescuing civilians, but he held his hand up. "Not about that," he said. "Look at your feed. That goddamn sniper is still alive."

I looked back at the building—or more accurately, at the pile of rubble. Near the periphery of the rubble, under about a meter of concrete, our sniper was trying to push a pile of concrete and rebar off of him.

"Come on," I said.

We reached the spot where the sniper was buried. Salcido trained his Empee on where the sniper's head would be while Powell and Lambert and I pulled chunks of building away from the hidden shooter. After a minute, I pried off a final slab, clearing a shot for Salcido.

"Jesus," he said.

Our sniper was fifteen standard years old at best and she was covered in blood from where the fallen concrete had creased her skull. I glanced through the rubble as best I could and saw her left arm pinned and her right leg going off in a direction it shouldn't.

"Get away from me," she said, and her voice told me that at least one of her lungs had collapsed.

"We can get you out of there," I said.

"Don't want your help, green."

I was confused by this until I figured out she meant me, with my green skin. I looked back at Salcido and his Empee. "Put that down and help us." He looked doubtful but did as he was told. I turned back to the sniper. "We're not going to hurt you," I said.

"You brought a building down on me," she wheezed.

"That wasn't our intent," I said. I skipped over the part where our intent was to shoot her in the head the moment she gave us a chance. "We'll get you out."

"No."

"You don't want to die here," I said.

"I do," she said. "This is where I lived. I lived here. And you destroyed it. Like you destroy everything."

"How are we doing?" I asked, not taking my eyes off the girl.

"Almost there," Powell said. Then she sent a message to me through her BrainPal. *The chunk of concrete on her leg is the only thing keeping her from bleeding out,* she said. *If we move it, she dies. She's dying anyway.*

"Okay," I said. *Call in for a medic,* I said through the BrainPal.

Why? Powell asked. *You're being awfully nice to someone who was just trying to kill you and who we were just trying to kill. She doesn't even want our help. You should just let her die.*

I gave you an order, I said. Powell visibly shrugged.

"We're going to call for a medic," I said, to the sniper.

"I don't want a medic," she said, and her eyes closed. "I don't want you. Why don't you leave. This isn't your planet. It's ours. We don't want you here. *Leave*. Just leave."

"It's not that simple," I said.

The girl didn't say anything. About a minute later she was dead.

• • •

"Well?" Lambert asked. He, Powell, and Salcido were waiting for me outside the security offices in Fushimi, where I had gone for a

discussion—to use the word euphemistically—of the sniper incident.

"I talked to Colonel Maxwell," I said, naming the head of the CDF joint mission in Fushimi. "She tells me that it was the Kyotans who requested we drop the apartment building."

"Why would they want that? I thought we were working on the assumption they *didn't* want that. Thus, all the sneaking up and trying not to destroy it on our part."

"The apartment block was apparently the local headquarters of the rebellion. Or more accurately, the local headquarters of the rebellion was in the apartment block."

"So the building was chock full of agitators," Powell said.

"Maxwell didn't break down the ratio of agitators to normal humans," I said. "And I didn't get the impression from her that the Kyotan government much cared. They wanted to send a message."

"How many other people did we kill getting out the message?" Lambert asked.

"None," Salcido said, and looked at me. "Sorry, you asked me to find that out and I didn't tell you because we got busy with other things. The Kyotan security forces did a sweep of the building a week ago and pulled everybody out. Block questioning and intimidation. That's what started this whole set of riots we're helping put down."

"So if they weren't all rebels before, they probably are now," Powell said.

"You wanted to drop the building," Lambert reminded her.

"The building got dropped," Powell reminded him. "Although Lambert's right. If they were just going to drop the building, why the hell *did* they send us in?"

"They sent us in before someone in the Kyoto security upper ranks remembered a CDF ship could level a building in a single shot, apparently," I said.

"We could have been killed."

"I guess they decided we were safe."

"*That's* reassuring," Powell said.

"At least it wasn't our idea," Lambert said. "That girl hated us enough. And if she hated us, she had to have learned it from someone else."

"It wasn't our idea, but one of our ships did the honors," I said. "I don't think that distinction would matter much to her or to anyone else. We're on the hook for this as much as the Kyoto government."

"Did you get anything on the sniper?" Salcido asked me.

"Rana Armijo. Sixteen standard. Parents apparently in deep with the rebellion. No sign of them. Either they're gone or the Kyotans already have them."

"So she becomes a martyr for the rebellion," Lambert said. "The government rounds up everyone in her apartment block, she stays behind, starts taking out security officers, and is so successful they have to drop the building on her head. It's a good story."

"It won't do *her* much good," Powell said.

"That's how it's supposed to work for martyrs."

"So what now?" Salcido asked.

"We're done here," I said. "There's ongoing rebel action in Sakyo and Yamashina, but the *Tubingen* has other orders. It's someone else's problem now."

"It was already someone else's problem," Lambert said. "Then we made it ours, too."

"Don't start, Lambert," Powell said. "It's especially tiring today."

"If it's tiring for you, think how it feels to them."

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PART THREE

A Thursday this time, and we're called upon to manage a protest.

"I'm not going to lie, I'm *really* curious to see these things in action," Lambert said, as the hurricane funnels were set up around the Colonial Union administrative building in Kyiv.

The administrative building itself was a skyscraper deposited in the center of a hectare of land in the downtown district. The entire hectare was a flat plaza, featureless except for a single piece of abstract sculpture. That sculpture was currently populated by several protesters, as was a large chunk of the plaza. The skyscraper was ringed by Kyiv policemen and CDF soldiers and hastily assembled metal barriers.

The protesters had not taken it into their heads to try to rush the skyscraper, but it was early in the day yet. Rather than wait for the inevitable, and the inevitable casualties to both protester and security forces, the Colonial Union had decided to employ the latest in less than lethal protest management: the hurricane funnel. One was being placed directly in front of my squad.

"It looks like an Alp horn," Powell said, as it was placed and started expanding out and up.

"Alpenhorn," I said. I was a musician in my past life.

"That's what I said," Powell replied, and then turned to Salcido. "You're the weapon nerd here. Explain this."

Salcido pointed up, at the very long tube snaking up to the sky, now about two hundred feet up. "Air gets sucked into the thing from up there. It gets drawn down and accelerated as it goes. It hits the curve, gets an extra push, and out it goes that way." He waved in the general direction of the protesters. "We set a perimeter length, and anytime one of them tries to get past it, the funnel ramps up a breeze and blows them down."

"Which should be fun to see," Lambert said. "Although these things are awfully inefficient, if we're talking *real* crowd control. It's like we're daring them to try to cross that line."

"They're not supposed to be efficient," I said. "They're supposed to send a message."

"What message? 'We'll huff and we'll puff and we'll blow your protest down'?"

"More like 'We don't even have to shoot you to render your protest utterly pointless.'"

"We seem to be sending a lot of messages recently," Lambert noted. "I'm not sure the message we're sending is the message they're receiving."

"The message this time will be a blast of wind that could knock over a house," Salcido said. "It'll get received."

"And we're not worried about getting sucked out into the rioters," Powell said. "Because that would be bad."

Salcido pointed upward again. "That's why collection happens up there," he said. "Plus there's some airflow mitigation happening on this side of the thing."

"All right," Powell said.

"Just…"

"What? Just *what*?"

"Don't get *too* close to the thing when it's running."

Powell looked sourly at Salcido. "You're fucking with me, aren't you."

"Yes. Yes I am. Fucking with you. You're right, by all means, stand close to the thing when it goes off. Nothing bad will happen to you at *all*."

"Lieutenant, I may have to shoot Sau."

"Both of you, knock it off," I said. I was watching the technicians finishing setting the thing up, which mostly consisted of them watching it, because like most things involving the Colonial Defense Forces, it was designed to operate with minimal assistance from humans, who were without exception the moving part most likely to fail. Left and right of where we were, other hurricane funnels were also unpacking themselves while technicians stood by. In all there were twenty-four of the things, circling the building.

When they were all set up the chief technician nodded to me; I nodded back and took control of the three funnels closest to me. I set the perimeter to thirty meters, which was ten meters further out than where the closest protesters were standing. I was pinged by the other seven CDF squads manning the other funnel stations, all of which I was commanding, letting me know they were online and also set at thirty meters. I stepped out in front of the funnels so the protesters could see me. They started jeering immediately, which was fine.

"Attention protesters," I said, and my voice was amplified mightily by the funnel directly behind me, too loud for anyone to ignore. As close as I was to the thing I might have been deafened if I hadn't already had my BrainPal dial down my hearing for a minute. "I am Colonial Defense Forces Lieutenant Heather Lee. In one minute, I will be establishing a protest perimeter of thirty yards entirely around this building. Your voluntary cooperation with this goal would be greatly appreciated."

This received the response that I entirely expected it would.

"Suit yourself," I said, and stepped back behind the funnel. "Turn down your ears," I instructed my squad. Then I turned to the commander of the Kyiv police and nodded to him; he yelled at all his officers to fall back behind the funnels. They did, taking the metal barriers with them. A cheer went up from the crowd and it started to surge forward. I turned on the funnels.

The output from the funnels went from zero to fifty kilometers per hour in about three seconds. The crowd, sensing a challenge, pressed forward with more determination. In another three seconds the funnels were blasting at a hundred klicks per hour; in another five seconds at one hundred and thirty. At one hundred and thirty kilometers an hour, the funnels also emitted a horrendous, eardrum-crushing note designed to encourage crowd dispersal. I turned my hearing up a little to listen.

It was a very low E.

Did I mention these things are REALLY LOUD? sent Salcido, over the squad's BrainPal channel.

The crowd was pushed back despite their best efforts. Some of them flung bottles and other objects toward the funnels and were surprised when they shifted course right back at them. Apparently you don't have to understand physics to protest.

When the last of the protesters were pushed back to the thirty-meter line the funnels ramped their output down to thirty kilometers an hour, and the low E dissipated. The crowd muttered and shouted, angry. The Kyiv police, no longer needed, filed into the administration building, where they went to the roof and were airlifted out.

And so it went. Over the next hour, occasionally one or two of the protesters would try to see if they could sprint to the barricade before the funnels could push them back. The answer: No.

"That kind of looks like fun, actually," Lambert said, as the latest protester blew back across the plaza. His speaking voice was augmented in my ear by his BrainPal signal.

"Don't be so sure." Powell pointed to a streak of red on the plaza, where the protester's head had connected with the concrete.

"Well, I don't want to do *that,* obviously," Lambert said. "The rest of it might be fun."

"Hey, boss," Salcido said, and pointed out into the crowd. "Something's up."

I looked out. In the distance the crowd was parting as a motor vehicle made its way up toward the front. I identified it with my BrainPal as a heavy truck of local manufacture, without the trailer that usually accompanied these types of haulers. As it moved closer to the front, the crowd started chanting and hollering.

"Why the hell didn't the police stop that thing all the way at the back?" Lambert asked.

"We sent them home," I said.

"We sent the ones up *here* home," Lambert said. "I find it hard to believe at least *some* of the Kyiv police aren't still on duty."

"Sau," I said. "Are these things going to stop that?"

"The funnels?"

"Yeah."

"Lieutenant, these babies can blast out wind up to three hundred kilometers per hour," Salcido said. "They won't just stop the truck. They'll pick it up and toss it."

"Right back into the crowd," Lambert noted.

"There is that," Salcido agreed. "That is, the part of the crowd that is not *also* tossed straight up into the air, along with anything else that isn't nailed down, and probably some stuff that is." He pointed down the plaza at the sculpture. "If these things go top speed, I wouldn't count on that staying put."

"Maybe these things weren't such a great idea after all," Lambert said.

The truck, at the front of the crowd now, started blinking its lights, as if to threaten us. The crowd cheered.

"Standard electric engine for something that size, if it's not modified," Salcido said. He'd pulled up the same manufacturer ID I had. "It's gonna take it a couple of seconds to get up to ramming speed."

The driver of the truck let loose on his horn, issuing a blast almost as loud as the funnels.

"This will be interesting," Lambert said.

The wheels of the truck squealed as the driver floored it.

"Powell," I said and sent at the same time.

The front of the truck blossomed into flame as Powell's rocket shoved itself into the truck's engine compartment and erupted, shattering the truck's battery banks and puffing out the hood with an explosive *crump*. The spinning wheels, robbed of momentum before they could completely grip, lurched forward slightly and then stopped, barely moving a few meters. The driver of the truck bailed out of the cab and took off running, one of many protesters who decided they'd had enough for the day.

A few still stood near the truck, uncertain of what they should be doing next. Powell shoved another rocket into the truck, this time into the empty cab. It went up like the proverbial Roman candle. More protesters decided it was time to go home.

"Thank you, Powell," I said.

"Took you long enough to ask," she said, cradling her Empee.

• • •

"Those things aren't exactly a long-term solution, now, are they?" Lambert asked. He nodded to the hurricane funnels, now five stories below us. The four of us were in a conference room that had been turned over as a rest area for the CDF recruited for guard work.

"It's local midnight and that crowd out there's not going anywhere," Powell said. "I think the funnels might be a feature for a while."

"It's going to make going to work difficult for the Colonial Union folks who work in this building."

"Maybe they'll all telecommute," Salcido said.

Lambert looked back out at the crowd. "Yeah. I would."

"How much longer are we here?" Powell asked me.

"The technicians are training the Kyiv police on operating the things," I said. "So a couple more days."

"And then what? Off to the next planet to squash another protest or stomp on another building?"

"You wanted to stomp that building in Kyoto," Lambert reminded Powell.

"I didn't say otherwise," Powell said, turning to Lambert. "I didn't mind putting a rocket through that truck today, either. The alternatives might have involved me getting hurt or killed. So, fine." She turned back to me. "But this wasn't the gig I signed up for."

"Technically speaking, you didn't know what the gig was when you signed up for it," Salcido said. "None of us did. All we knew was we were getting off the planet Earth."

"Sau can play lawyer all he wants, but you know what I mean, Lieutenant," Powell said.

"Ilse's right," Lambert said. "This is our third mission in a row where we're trying to keep a lid on people rebelling against the Colonial Union."

"These sort of missions have always been part of the deal," I said. "Before you three came on I and the *Tubingen* were called on to squash an uprising on Zhong Guo. Some people there got it in their head that they wanted an alliance with Earth."

"Did they tell the Earth about that?" Salcido asked.

"Don't think they did," I said, and then motioned out the window, to the protest. "My point is that *this* is, in fact, our mission. Part of it, anyway."

"Okay, but three in a row," Lambert said.

"What about it?"

"Has that happened before, in your experience? Ever?"

"No."

"And you've been in the CDF how long, now? Six years?"

"Seven," I said. "And three months."

"Not that you're counting," Powell said.

"If you don't you lose track," I said. I turned back to Lambert. "All right, yes, it's unusual."

"And that doesn't bother you?" Lambert asked. "Wait—I phrased that poorly. I mean to say, you don't find it troublesome? Because when Ilse here, our current queen of the 'who gives a shit' line of thinking, is starting to get tired of our act, there might be a problem."

"I didn't say I was tired of it," Powell said. "I said it's not what I signed up for."

"There's a distinction in your brain between the two," Lambert said.

"Yeah, there is," Powell said. "I'm not *tired* of this. I can do this shit in my sleep. But I don't see it as *my* job. My job is shooting the hell out of aliens who are trying to kill us."

"Amen to *that,*" Salcido said.

"What we're doing here, I mean, really, who gives a shit?" Powell said. She waved out the window. "These people are protesting. So what? Let them protest. They want to break up with the Colonial Union, let them."

"When the other species come down to scrape them off the planet, then *your* job would get harder," I pointed out.

"No it wouldn't, because they're not part of the Colonial Union anymore. Fuck 'em."

"I don't think I've ever told you how much, and in a twisted way, I assure you, I admire your commitment to amorality," Lambert said.

"It's not amoral," Powell said. "If they're part of the Colonial Union, I'll defend them. That's my job. If they want to go their own way, fine. I don't see it as my job to stop them. But I also won't stop the aliens from shoving them into a pot if they do, either."

"Maybe that's what we need," Salcido said. "One of these planets to go it alone and get the hell kicked out of them. That would bring the rest of them back into line."

"But that's the problem, isn't it?" Lambert said. "It's not just one of them. Not just one planet. It's a bunch of them, all at the same time."

"It's that thing," Salcido said. "That group. Equilibrium. Showing up and doing that data dump."

"What about it?" Powell asked.

"Well, it makes sense. All of these planets with people getting worked up all of a sudden."

"They're not getting worked up *all of a sudden*," Lambert said. "That rebellion in Kyoto was long-cooking. And the lieutenant here made the point about putting down a rebellion a year ago, on … where?"

"Zhong Guo," I said.

"Thank you. Maybe that Equilibrium thing is crystallizing action now, but whatever it's tapping into has been there already for years."

"Then the Colonial Union should have been preparing for this for years," Powell said, bored now with this conversation. "But it didn't, and now we and everyone else on the *Tubingen* are shuttling from one stupid internal crisis to the next. It's stupid and it's a waste."

"No, it makes sense," Lambert said.

"You figure? How's that."

“We’re not attached to this place. We’re not attached to Kyoto. We weren’t attached to Franklin. We’re not attached to any of the colonies because we originally came from Earth. So it’s not difficult for us to come in and stomp around if we have to.”

“We’re handing off the work here to the Kyiv police,” Salcido pointed out.

“Right, after we handled the hard part. That’s our job. Handling the hard parts.”

“But you just said that this isn’t a long-term solution,” Salcido said, waving out to the funnels. “In which case the hard part is still here, which means we’ll be back. Or someone like us.”

“Yeah, funny, I remember talking about not addressing root causes a couple of weeks ago, and got shouted down with ‘who cares’ and a song about pizza.”

“It was a great song.”

“If you say so.”

“All I’m saying is that what we’re doing now is increasingly full of bullshit,” Powell said, bringing the discussion around. “If this is what we’re doing now, fine. So be it. But I’d rather be shooting aliens. I think everyone else would too.”

“She’s not wrong,” Salcido said, to me.

“No, she’s not,” Lambert agreed.

“I know,” I said.

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PART FOUR

Friday.

"Root causes," Lambert was saying. "You all kept mocking me for talking about them and now look where we are. Another colony planet. Another uprising. Except this time the planet's already declared independence."

The shuttle rocked on the way through Khartoum's atmosphere. This time it was not only the four of us but my entire platoon, as it was on Rus. We weren't doing protest suppression this time. This time we were making a surgical strike on Khartoum's prime minister, who had declared the planet independent, encouraged mobs to occupy Colonial Union buildings, and then hidden himself, with a circle of advisors, in an undisclosed location, presumably because he knew that the Colonial Union wasn't going to be particularly happy with him.

Indeed it wasn't. It wasn't happy with him, or in fact any of his party's leadership, all of which had endorsed the independence—without, it should be noted, actually presenting it to the entire parliament for ratification.

"They learned from Franklin," Lambert continued. "This time they knew not to give us a chance to respond first."

"Which makes their independence illegal," Salcido noted. He was sitting next to Lambert.

"It was always going to be illegal," Lambert said. "By which I mean there was no possible way the Colonial Union would accept the legality of their independence. So there was no reason for them to put it up to a vote."

"But now it's also illegal by their own system of government."

"No, because the prime minister had his cabinet approve a declaration of emergency powers and dissolved the current government," Lambert said. "All legal as can be."

"For what little good it's going to do him," Powell said. She was down a bit from Lambert and Salcido, on the other side of the shuttle, as was I.

"Oh, now, Ilse, he'll be *fine,*" Salcido said. "He's in an *undisclosed location*."

"Which we're on our way to right now. Another high-altitude drop and destroy."

"We need to get Prime Minister Okada alive," I reminded Powell.

"High-altitude drop, snatch, and *then* destroy," Powell corrected.

"Which begs the question of how we know where this undisclosed location is," Lambert said, to me.

"Okada's had nanotransmitters in his blood since he became prime minister," I said.

"I assume he doesn't know that."

"Probably not."

"How did they get there, if you don't mind me asking?"

"No idea," I said. "If I had to guess, I imagine at some point or another he had a meal at the Colonial Union compound, and they were slipped to him then."

"And we wonder why the Colonial Union isn't looked on with great enthusiasm," Lambert said.

Powell rolled her eyes. "Here we go."

"You can snark at me all you want, Ilse," Lambert said, and then disappeared as a hole in the shuttle appeared behind him and he was sucked out into Khartoum's upper atmosphere, along with Salcido and the soldiers on either side of them. My combat suit, sensing pressure drop and shuttle damage, immediately snuck its mask over my head and started drawing oxygen out of what remained of the air in the shuttle cabin. Simultaneously as platoon leader I was patched into the shuttle's systems, which told me what I already knew: The shuttle had been hit and was no longer in full control of its descent.

I fought down the urge to panic and focused on damage assessment. The pilot was trying to keep the shuttle from tumbling, fighting with the now damaged controls. Four soldiers out the growing hole in the side of the shuttle. Five others dead or mortally injured, another five seriously injured but alive. Fifteen uninjured and me.

The shuttle was declaring it was being tracked; whoever hit us wasn't done.

I connected to the shuttle and authorized the shuttle doors to open. *Everybody out now,* I said, through the platoon BrainPal feed. My simulated voice made me sound more calm than I was.

We were all already suited up to jump out of the shuttle. We were just doing it earlier now.

By fireteams. Let's go.

The remainder of the platoon started out the doors. Powell stayed back with me, yelling at stragglers. The pilot kept the shuttle steady as possible. Powell and I got out of the door just before some sort of kinetic round tore the shuttle apart. I did a quick ping on the pilot's uniform's system feed. There was nothing there.

Lieutenant, Powell sent. She was falling about one hundred meters away from me and sent to me via tightbeam. *Look down.*

I looked down and saw flickering beams shooting up into the evening sky. They weren't going all the way up into the atmosphere;

they were terminating on points below me.

They were hitting my soldiers. Killing them.

Full camo chaos dive, I sent over the platoon channel, to everyone still alive. Then I ordered my suit to seal me in, went dark on communication, and made myself as close to a hole in the atmosphere as I could. The suit's camo function would hide me visually and would do what it could to scatter any electromagnetic waves that would be sweeping over me, trying to bounce back to a receiver set on targeting me. My suit was also making subtle movements and sending out extensions to move me around randomly, changing my speed and direction of descent, almost making it harder to target me. Every platoon member who heard my order was now doing the same.

Chaos diving could kill an unmodified human with the jerks and turns. My suit stiffened up at the neck and other joints to minimize the potential injury. It didn't mean I didn't feel my insides strain. But it wasn't meant to be comfortable. It was meant to keep you alive.

One other thing: The electromagnetic-scattering camouflage effectively makes you blind. You fall, relying on the data your suit polled before you turned it on to allow it to track where you were and how far you had fallen, factoring in all the shifts in direction and descent speed and feeding that into your BrainPal. The camo was designed to give me a visual feed again one klick up—just enough time to assess and plan a final descent path.

Unless there was an error, in which case I would see the ground just before I smacked straight into it. Or I might never see the ground at all. There would just be a sudden thump.

Also: I wouldn't know if one of those beams had found me until it started frying me.

The point is that you don't do a full camo chaos dive unless you absolutely have to. But that's where we were at the moment. Me and every other soldier in the platoon.

It also meant that when we landed, we would be scattered all across the countryside, coms quiet to avoid detection. In our briefing I had given the platoon an alternative extraction point in case something went wrong, but having the shuttle shot out from under us so far up and then performing a chaos dive meant that the remainder of the platoon was likely to be scattered over an area a hundred klicks to a side. When we landed, we were going to be alone, and hunted.

I had several minutes to contemplate all of this as I fell.

I also had several minutes to think about what had happened. Simply put, there should have been no way for the shuttle to have been shot out of Khartoum's upper atmosphere. Khartoum had defenses like any Colonial Union planet would, to prevent alien species from attempting an attack. But as they had been on Franklin and every other planet we'd visited recently, these defenses were built and run by the Colonial Union itself. Even if these installations had been overrun by Khartoum's citizens and abandoned by their CU operators, anyone trying to operate them would have been locked out by a nested set of security measures. Unless the CU operators had gone over to the other side—possible but not likely—those were someone else's beams.

Another wrinkle: The *Tubingen* should have been tracking the shuttle's descent and alerting us to, and defending us from, any ground-based attacks. If it hadn't, it would have been because it was otherwise occupied. Which is to say, that it was being attacked, either from the surface of the planet or above it. In either case, also not from the Colonial Union.

If this was correct, then it meant a couple of things. It meant that whatever was happening on Khartoum, it wasn't just about the planet's independence—the planet had aligned itself with enemies of the Colonial Union. And then it laid a trap for us. Not for the *Tubingen* itself—whoever was doing this didn't know which among the Colonial Defense Forces ships were going to respond. The *Tubingen,* its shuttle,

and my platoon were all incidental in this. No, the trap was for the Colonial Union itself.

But why, and for what purpose?

My visual feed kicked on and I was a klick above the ground. In the distance were lights which suggested some form of civilization. Directly below me was dark, hilly, and full of vegetation. I waited as long as possible and deployed breaking nanobots, which spread out widely to catch the air. I landed hard and rolled and then stayed on my back for a moment, catching my breath and looking up at the sky. It was local night and the darkness of the vegetation combined with my Colonial Union-designed eyes meant I could see the stars in all their local constellations. I sighted several and, with local time and date, calculated my position.

I checked with my BrainPal to see if there was any signal from the *Tubingen*. I didn't want to try to signal them, in case anyone was listening, but if they were sending to us they might have information we survivors could use.

Nothing. That wasn't good.

I stood up, visual camo still on, and walked to where I could again see the lights in the distance. I applied the visual to the data for ground maps I had in my BrainPal for the mission. I checked that against the position of the stars in the sky. I was in the foothills above the suburbs of Omdurman, Khartoum's capital city. I was forty-five klicks southeast of the city's capital district, thirty-eight klicks south of the "undisclosed location" where I knew the prime minister to be, and twenty-three klicks southwest of the secondary extraction point where I hoped any survivors of my platoon were now heading.

I wasn't interested in any of those at the moment. Instead I called up my visual cache of the last hour and tracked back to a visual of one of the beams targeting a soldier of mine, and started using the visual

information, along with my descent data, to track back the location of whatever was creating that beam.

Sixteen klicks due almost directly north, also in the foothills, near an abandoned reservoir.

"Got you," I said, bumped up my low-light visual acuity as much as possible to avoid falling into a hole, and started jogging toward the target. As I did I had my BrainPal play me music, so I would be distracted from thinking about Lambert, or Salcido, or Powell, or any other members of my platoon.

I would think about them later. I would grieve them later. Right now I needed to find out who shot them down.

• • •

Six klicks from the target, something knocked me off my feet and threw me to the ground. I immediately pushed off and rolled, confused because I had my visual camo on, and because whatever hit me and tossed me to the ground was nowhere to be seen. I had been shoved by a ghost.

Lieutenant.

It took me a second to realize that the voice I heard was through my BrainPal, not my ears.

Directly in front of you, the voice said. *Tightbeam me. I don't know if we're still being tracked.*

Powell? I said, via tightbeam, incredulous.

Yes, she said. She sent me visual permissions on her suit, which allowed my BrainPal to model where her body would be. She was indeed a meter directly in front of me. I tightbeamed her similar permissions.

Sorry about tackling you, she said.

How did you do that? I asked. *I mean, how did you know that I was there?*

Are you listening to music?

I was, I said. *So?*

You were singing as you ran.

Jesus, I said.

You didn't know?

No. But I'm not surprised. When I was a musician they had to turn off my microphone at gigs because I would sing along. I can play any stringed instrument you can name, but I can't sing worth a damn.

I noticed that much, Powell said, and I smiled despite myself. Powell motioned back, to the southeast. *I came down that direction and started heading this way and began hearing you a couple of klicks back. I waited until I was sure it was you.*

You could have tightbeamed me instead of tackling me.

It seemed safer this way. If you were on the ground there was less chance of you grabbing your Empee and spraying the brush out of surprise.

Point. Why are you headed this way, though? The secondary extraction point is not this way.

No. But the assholes who shot us down are.

I smiled again. *It does not at all surprise me to hear you say that.*

Of course it doesn't. Just as I'm not surprised to find you on the way there.

No, I suppose not.

Shall we go?

Yes, I said. We both stood up.

Just to be clear, I plan to kill the shit out of every single one of them we find, Powell said.

We may want one or two for questioning, I said.

Your call. You better point out which ones you want ahead of time.

I will. Also, Ilse?

Yes, Lieutenant?

What was your job back on Earth? I've always been curious.

I taught eighth-grade math in Tallahassee.

Huh, I said. *That's not what I expected.*

Are you kidding? Powell said back. *You try teaching algebra to a bunch of little shitheads for thirty-eight years straight. The way I figure it I've got about another decade before my rage from that gets entirely burned up.*

Whatever works. Ready?

Yes I am, Powell said. *I've got some anger to work out. And not just from teaching.*

• • •

Well, this is definitely not good, Powell said to me.

The two of us, still in full camo, lay two hundred meters out from a large concrete slab, itself on the edge of a disused reservoir. On the slab were two missile launchers, an electromagnetic mass driver, and two beam weapons. One of the launchers was missing two of its missiles, and next to it two specialists had hauled over new weapons to load onto it. The specialists were not human.

Fucking Rraey, Powell said, naming the species. *What are they doing here?*

Shooting down our shuttles, I said.

But why? How did they even get onto this planet?

I think they were invited.

By the prime minister? I'm going to shoot him twice now.

We still need to bring him in alive, I said.

I didn't say I was going to kill him, Powell replied. *Just that I was going to shoot him twice.*

Let's focus on what we're doing here first.

All right, Powell said. *How do you want to do this?*

I looked again at the slab. Each of the weapon platforms had its own set of technicians and operators, which amounted to four Rraey each. Each of the platforms also had its own power source, the largest

being attached to the mass driver, which had to pull some serious energy into its electromagnets. The platforms were spaced haphazardly, as if they were hastily installed and meant to be equally hastily removed. And indeed toward the back of the platform were a set of trucks large enough to pack up the platforms and drive them away. There was a fifth truck as well, smaller than the rest, out of the top of which sprouted various communications receivers. Inside of it were several Rraey, visible through windows. Command and communications. Finally, two Rraey with rifles walked the perimeter of the slab. Security, such as it was.

I see about twenty-four Rraey, I said, to Powell.

I check your math, she said.

I want at least a couple alive.

Fine. Anyone in particular?

Let's keep the C&C staff breathing for now.

You're the boss.

You take the security and the trucks, and knock out the C&C power.

Some of them will still have handhelds.

Don't give them time to use them.

You said you wanted them unharmed.

I said I wanted them breathing.

Oh, okay, Powell said. *That makes things easier.*

I'll take the weapons crews.

That's a lot.

I have a plan.

Yeah? What is it?

Watch this, I said, set my Empee for a particle beam, and shot into one of the missiles the weapons crew was trying to install into the launcher. I aimed not for the payload, but the fuel.

It went up like holiday fireworks, taking the launcher, its missiles, its crew, and the crews of the adjoining platforms with it. Everything

on the slab crumpled, including any Rraey unfortunate enough to be outside when the missile platform went up. It was a good thing we still had our masks on; they protected our ears from the blast.

"I thought you might do that," Powell said out loud, breaking cover and standing up.

"You're not worried about them seeing you?" I asked.

"Lieutenant, at this point I *want* them to see me coming," she said, and stalked off, Empee up.

I smiled, stayed crouched, and waited for any of the Rraey on the slab to start moving again. From time to time one would start to move away. I stopped them from continuing to do so.

There was a soft thudding sound; Powell had taken out the command truck's power source. I saw her stalk across the slab, toward the truck, shooting truck drivers as she went. Behind her, one of the Rraey truck drivers had grabbed a weapon and was maneuvering around its truck to get a shot. I dealt with it.

You missed one, I sent to her.

I knew he was there, she sent back. *I knew you were there too.*

A Rraey appeared out the door of the command truck's cabin. Powell shot it in the leg; it went down squawking.

Keep a couple alive, I said.

That depends on them, Powell sent back. She reached the truck, grabbed the squawking Rraey, and pushed it in front of her as she went through the cabin door.

Things were quiet, at least from my point of view, for a couple of minutes afterward.

I left a couple alive, Powell said, after those couple of minutes had passed. *But you might want to hurry.*

I hurried down.

The inside of the command truck was a mess. There were three dead Rraey in it, including the one Powell had shot in the leg. Two more

Rraey were at the back of the cabin, keening. From what little I knew of Rraey physiology, they were both sporting broken limbs. Powell had stripped them of their personal electronics; the rest of the cabin's electronics were down. Light in the cabin consisted of a couple of small emergency lights.

"Any trouble?" I asked Powell as she entered.

"No," she said. "They're not very good at close quarters."

"Well, that's something," I said.

Powell nodded and pointed to one of the survivors. "I think that's the one in charge," she said. "At least that's the one everyone tried to keep me from getting at."

I went over to the Rraey, who was looking up at me. I accessed my BrainPal, which had translation modules for the couple hundred species we humans had encountered the most often; the Rraey were in there. Their language contained sounds that we can't make, but the BrainPal would pick words that suited our mouths and throats. I'd tell the BrainPal what I wanted to say and it would offer me a suitable translation.

"Are you in charge here?" I asked the Rraey Powell had pointed out to me.

"I will not answer your questions," the Rraey said to me, in its language, which my BrainPal translated for me.

"I could break something else," Powell said. She was listening in.

"Torture isn't useful to get information," I said.

"I didn't say anything about getting information."

I looked back to her. "Give me a minute here, please," I said. Powell snorted.

I turned back to the Rraey. "You are hurt," I said, in its language. "Let us help you get better."

"We're hurt because of that animal over there," the Rraey said, jerking its head to Powell.

"You are hurt because you attacked us," I said. "You cannot attack us and expect nothing to happen in return."

The creature said nothing to this.

"You are here on a planet you should not be," I said. "Helping humans, which you should not do. You need to tell me why."

"I will not."

"We can help you. We will help you and your soldier here," I said, pointing to the other injured Rraey. "You will not survive if you do not get help."

"I will gladly die."

"But will you ask this soldier to die too?" I said. "Have you asked this soldier what it wants?"

"You're doing that thing where you're trying to be nice to someone you were just trying to kill," Powell said. "It doesn't work, because they remember you were trying to kill them five minutes ago."

"Ilse."

"I'm just pointing this out. Someone needs to say it."

I ignored her and turned back to the Rraey. "I am Lieutenant Heather Lee of the Colonial Defense Forces," I said. "I promise you that from this point forward you will not be harmed. It's a promise whether you help me or not. But if you help me, then I may say to my superiors that you have been useful. And they will treat you better."

"We know how you treat your prisoners," the Rraey said.

"And we know how you treat yours," I said. "We can change things now."

"Kill me and get it over with," the Rraey said.

"I don't want to die," said the other Rraey.

The first Rraey squawked something at his underling, which my BrainPal translated as "[Silence/You are making a shameful utterance]."

"You won't," I said, turning my attention to it. "Help me, soldier. Help me and you will live. I promise you."

"I am Specialist Ketrin Se Lau," it said. It motioned with its head to the other Rraey. "This is Commander Frui Ko Tvann. We are here on behalf of Equilibrium. We are here because the government of Khartoum has struck a deal with us."

"What's the deal?"

"Protection," it said. "Once the Colonial Union falls, Equilibrium will protect it from species who will try to raid or take over."

"In exchange for what?"

Commander Tvann squawked again and tried to strike Lau. Powell crossed the distance between the two and held her Empee on Tvann.

"In exchange for what?" I repeated.

"You won't kill us," Lau asked. "You promise."

"Yes, I promise. Neither of you."

"You won't torture us."

"We won't. We're going to help you. I promise, Specialist Lau."

"Protection in exchange for laying a trap," Lau said. "For luring you here."

"That doesn't make sense," Powell said. "The Colonial Union only sent one ship. Even if the *Tubingen* is destroyed we'll just send more. A lot more. This uprising will fail and then we'll go after the Rraey for helping them."

"Unless there's more to it," I said, and turned back to Lau. "What else is there?"

"I don't know," Lau said. "I'm a specialist. They only told me what I had to know for my part."

I turned to Tvann. "And I don't expect you want to fill me in." Tvann turned its head from me.

"So we have a dead end here," Powell said.

"No," I said, and then cut off as the *Tubingen* opened a feed, searching for us. It had been attacked and damaged but had survived

and with the help of another ship had destroyed the two ships attacking it. It was now asking for status reports.

"Well, at least we're not entirely screwed," Powell said.

"Call it in," I said to her. "Let them know we need immediate medical evac for two Rraey prisoners of war. Tell them I've promised they won't be further harmed."

"That's going to go over well."

"Just do it."

"Anything else?"

"Tell them to send another shuttle for the two of us. We have another mission to finish."

• • •

On the way back, our shuttle was diverted from the *Tubingen* to the other Colonial Union ship.

"I haven't heard of the *Chandler* before," Powell said.

"It's a State Department ship, not a CDF ship," I said.

"A State Department ship with a fully operational offensive weapons system."

"Times have changed," I said.

"These constraints are hurting my arms," said Masahiko Okada, the now-former prime minister of Khartoum. It's possible that he might still be considered the prime minister by some, but from a practical matter his days in charge of things were now over. "I'm very uncomfortable."

"And several of my friends are dead," Powell said, to Okada. "So maybe you should think you're getting the better end of the deal and shut up."

Okada turned to me. "If you don't think people will know about how you're treating me—"

"Let me throw him out," Powell said, to me.

Okada turned back to Powell. "What?"

"Let me throw him out," Powell repeated to me. "This shitbucket is the reason Lambert and Salcido are dead. Not to mention everyone else in the platoon."

"Not everyone else is dead," I reminded her. "Gould and DeConnick survived, too."

"Gould and DeConnick are both in critical condition," Powell said. "They *might* survive. And if they don't that leaves just you and me. Out of an entire fucking platoon." She jabbed a finger at Okada. "I think that rates him getting a space walk without a suit."

I turned to Okada. "Your thoughts, Mr. Prime Minister?"

"It's the Colonial Union that instigated this rebellion, not the government of Khartoum," Okada began.

"Oh, that is *it*," Powell interrupted, and stood up. "Time for you to breathe some vacuum, motherfucker." Okada visibly shrunk away from Powell.

I held up a hand. Powell stopped advancing on Okada. "New plan," I said. I pointed to Okada. "You don't say another single word until after we dock with the *Chandler*"—I glanced back to Powell—"and you don't toss him into space."

Okada said nothing more, even after we had landed and some of the *Chandler*'s crew took him away.

"He seems quiet," the *Chandler* crew member who approached me said, nodding over to Okada. Unlike all the others, he was green, which meant he was CDF.

"He was sufficiently motivated," I said.

"It appears so," he said. "Now, then. Do you remember me, Lieutenant Lee?"

"I do, Lieutenant Wilson," I said. I motioned to Powell. "This is my sergeant, Ilse Powell."

"Sergeant," Wilson said, and turned his attention back to me. "I'm glad you remember me. I'm supposed to debrief you and catch you up

with things."

"What we'd really like to do is get back to the *Tubingen,*" I said.

"Well," Wilson said. "About that."

"What is it?"

"Maybe we should find someplace to sit down and chat."

"Maybe you should just tell me right now because otherwise I might punch you, Wilson."

He smiled. "You definitely haven't changed. All right, here it is: The *Tubingen* survived the attack on her, but 'survive' is a relative term. She's essentially dead in orbit. She might have been entirely destroyed but we managed to get here in time and help her fight off the ships attacking her."

"And how did you do that?" I asked. "Arrive in the nick of time."

"We had a hunch," Wilson said, "and that's all I can say about that right now, here, out in the open in a shuttle bay."

"Hmmmm."

"My point is that if you really want to head back to the *Tubingen* you may after we're done debriefing. But you won't be staying there. At best you'll have time to collect any personal belongings that weren't destroyed in the battle before the *John Henry* and other ships arrive to take you and all the other survivors of the *Tubingen* back to Phoenix Station for reassignment. You might as well stay here. We can have your effects brought to you."

"How many people died in the attack on the *Tubingen*?" Powell asked.

"Two hundred fifteen dead, another several dozen injured. That's not counting your platoon. Sorry about that. We've retrieved them, by the way."

"Where are they?" I asked.

"They're in one of the mess coolers at the moment."

"I'd like to see them."

"I don't recommend that. It's not very dignified. How they are being stored, I mean."

"I don't care."

"I'll have it arranged, then."

"I also want to know about the two Rraey I sent back."

"They're in our brig, and receiving medical attention, inasmuch as we can give it to them," Wilson said. "Their injuries were substantial but thankfully not terribly complicated. Mostly broken bones, which we could set and tend. Which one of you did that, by the way?"

"That would be me," Powell said.

"You're fun," Wilson said.

"You should see me on the second date."

Wilson smiled at this and turned his attention back to me. "We received your instruction that they were not to be further harmed. That was not a problem because we had no intention of doing so. You do understand we will need to question them."

"You can question them without harming them," I said.

"Yes we can," Wilson said. "I just want you to be clear that the questioning is likely to be aggressive, even if it's not physical. Particularly of Commander Tvann, who is interesting to us for other reasons than just his involvement here."

"Who's going to do the questioning?"

"Well, here it's going to be me."

"Commander Tvann doesn't seem very forthcoming."

"Don't worry, I think I can get him to talk without breaking anything else in his body. I've worked with Rraey before. Trust me."

"All right. Thank you," I said. I nodded in the direction of where Okada went. "What's going to happen with him?"

"Him, I'm not going to make too many promises about," Wilson said. "He's managed to perform a neat little trick. Not only has he betrayed the Colonial Union, he's also betrayed his own rebellion."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that there were ten Colonial Union planets that were supposed to announce their independence from the CU simultaneously, and that Khartoum was one of them. But Khartoum jumped the gun, announced early, and then lured the *Tubingen* into a trap."

"Why would they do that?"

"That's what we need to find out," Wilson said. "What he tells us is going to make a difference in how the Colonial Union as a whole deals with these rebellious planets."

"Do you think he'll talk?" Powell asked.

"By the time we get done with him, getting him to talk won't be the problem. It'll be getting him to shut up. Now, are you ready for the formal debriefing?"

"Actually, I would like to see my soldiers first," I said.

"All right," Wilson said.

• • •

I found Lambert waist high in a stack of dead bodies near the back of the mess cooler. Salcido I found two stacks over, closer to the floor. They did not bear close observation.

"Lambert was right, you know," Powell said. She was with me in the cooler. Wilson had walked us to the cooler, opened it, and then waited outside. The cooler had been cleared of shelves and the contents they usually stored; the latter were either restocked in a different cooler or being fed to the survivors of the *Tubingen,* who were in the mess itself, unhappily crowded together.

At least they weren't crowded together in here.

"What was he right about?" I asked.

"Root causes," Powell said.

"You of all people," I said, almost smiling.

"I didn't ever say he was wrong. I said 'who cares.'"

"But now you do care."

"I care more than I used to. What are we doing here, Lieutenant? We're running around putting out fires. And fine, we're the fire brigade. Our job is putting out the fires. Not worrying about how they got started, just putting them out. But at some point even the fire brigade has to start asking who is starting all these fires, and why it's being left to us to continually put them out."

"Lambert would be laughing his head off to hear you say that."

"If he were here to laugh his head off, I wouldn't be saying it. He'd be saying it. Again." Powell motioned to where Salcido was. "And Sau would be geeking out over some point of trivia. And I would be sniping at both of them, and you would be playing referee. And we would all be one happy family again, instead of the two of us looking at the two of them in a meat locker."

"You've lost friends before," I said.

"Of course I have," Powell said. "And so have you. It doesn't make it any easier when it happens."

We were silent for a moment.

"I have a speech running through my head," I finally said, to Powell.

"One you were going to make?" Powell asked.

"No. One someone else made, that I've been thinking a lot about the last few weeks, when we've been running around putting out fires."

"Which one is it?"

"It's the Gettysburg Address. Abraham Lincoln. You remember it?"

Powell smirked. "I lived in America and taught in a junior high. I remember it."

"It's something like three hundred words long, and it wasn't even well received when Lincoln gave it. The part I'm thinking about is where he says 'Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether

that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.'"

Powell nodded. "You think we're in a civil war right now."

"I don't know what we're in right now," I said. "It doesn't feel like a real war. It's too strung out. Too diffuse. It's not battlefield after battlefield. It's skirmish after skirmish."

"Let me clear it up for you," Powell said. "It's a civil war. We lost the Earth. The Colonial Union only has so long before it has to turn to all the colonies to support it with the things it used to get for free from the Earth. The colonies are asking if what they get from the Colonial Union is worth the cost, and worth the cost of having the Colonial Union keep running things. Sounds like the answer for at least some of them is no. And it seems like now they think the arm the Colonial Union was using to shield them is now up against their throat. So they're trying to get out before the whole thing falls down around them."

"They're not doing a good job of it," I said.

"They don't have to do a good job of it for it to be a civil war. And they're *not* doing a good job of it so far." Powell motioned around her. "But it looks like they're learning. And it looks like they're getting allies with this Equilibrium group."

"I don't think Equilibrium, whoever they are, are doing this out of the goodness of their own heart."

"You're not wrong about that, but it doesn't matter from the point of view of this being a civil war. If they don't think the Colonial Union has their interests at heart, then it's a case of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend.'"

"That's not a very smart strategy."

"Smart has nothing to do with this. We could go around and around like this for hours, Lieutenant."

"What do you think?" I said.

"About what?"

"About the Colonial Union," I said. "About it controlling these planets. About how it responds to things like this." I waved my hand around the room. "About all of *this*."

Powell looked vaguely surprised. "The Colonial Union's a fascistic shit show, boss. I knew that much from the first day I set foot on one of their boats to get away from Earth. Are you kidding? They control trade. They control communications. They don't let the colonies protect themselves and they don't let them do anything that doesn't go through the Colonial Union itself. And let's not forget everything they've done to Earth. They've been doing it for centuries. Shit, Lieutenant. I'm not surprised we have a civil war on our hands right now. I'm surprised it didn't happen *sooner*."

"And yet here we are," I said. "You and me, in their uniform."

"We didn't want to die old," Powell said. "I was seventy-five and I spent most of my whole life in Florida and I had bone cancer and never did the things I wanted to do and it was eating me up. You think I'm an asshole now, you should have seen me just before I left Earth. You would have pushed me off a building just on principle, and you wouldn't have been wrong to do it."

"Well, all right," I said. "We didn't know coming out here what we'd be getting ourselves into."

"No, we didn't."

"But now you *do* know," I said. "And if you knew then what you knew now, would you still do it?"

"Yes," Powell said. "I still don't want to die old."

"But you just said the Colonial Union is a fascistic shit show."

"It is, and right now it's the only way we survive," Powell said. "Look around. Look at the planets we've been on. Look at all the species out there we've had to fight. Do you really think any of these planets and the people on them won't get carved up the first minute the

Colonial Union disappears? They've never fought before. Not on the scale they would need to. They have no military infrastructure on the scale they'd have to have. And they would have no time to ramp any of that up. The Colonial Union is a monster, but the colonies are fucking baby deer in a forest full of predators."

"Then how does any of that change?"

"Got me, boss, I just work here. What I do know is that it *is* going to change. It has to change because we don't have the Earth anymore. The mechanics of the Colonial Union, what it was founded on, just don't work anymore. It changes or we all die. And I'm doing my part to keep it together until then. The alternative is grim."

"I suppose it might be," I said.

"What about you? Would you do it again, Lieutenant?"

"I don't know," I said. "I didn't want to die old, you're right." I reached out and touched Lambert's cold arm. "But there are worse ways to go."

"He went mid-pontification," Powell said. "I'm pretty sure that's how he would have wanted to go."

I laughed at that. "Fair enough," I said. "I think my point is that I get it now. I get that there are worse things than to have lived a life and have most of it behind you. I wouldn't be afraid of that anymore, I think."

"Maybe. It's easy to say that now that you look twenty years old and will live for another sixty even if you left the CDF today."

"Again, a fair point."

"This is why I told Lambert to stop going on about it, you know," Powell said. "All the thinking about the steps beyond what we were directly doing. It never makes you happy. It never solves anything for you, right now."

I smiled. "And yet you were the one to bring it up, here, now."

“Yes, well.” Powell grimaced. “Think of it as a tribute. To our departed friend. I’ll never do it again.”

I motioned to Salcido. “And him?”

“Shit, I don’t know,” Powell said. “Maybe listen to that stupid pizza moon song again. Or think about what day it is in the mess. Which is complete bullshit, by the way. You can get pizza and tacos and hamburgers any day you want. It’s just which entrée they push out in front.”

“I know,” I said. “But that wasn’t the point of the conversation, was it.”

“No,” Powell said. “No, it wasn’t.”

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PART FIVE

Why are we even here? Powell said to me, through her BrainPal. We and the rest of our platoon on the *Uppsala* were policing a protest on Erie, in the city of Galway. The protest was entirely peaceful. All the protesters were doing, all anyone was doing, as far as I could see, was lying down. Everywhere. There were at least 100,000 of them. She was thirty yards away from me, part of a defensive line in front of the Colonial Union offices.

We're protecting Colonial Union property, I sent back.

What are they going to do, lay on it?

I seem to remember you recently complaining about people thinking too much about our missions, I said.

This seems like something the local police can handle.

Indeed, I said, and pointed at a woman lying about two meters from me, in a police uniform. *There's the chief of police. You can talk to her about it.*

Even from thirty yards away I could hear Powell's snort of derision.

The problem with Erie was not that the population had tried to declare its independence, or tried to burn down the Colonial Union local headquarters, or had invited less than entirely altruistic alien species to attack Colonial ships and soldiers. The problem was that Erie had gone on strike.

Not entirely on strike; the planet was still feeding itself and clothing itself and taking care of its own internal needs. But it had decided that, for now, it was no longer in the export business. This presented a problem for the Colonial Union because the Colonial Union bought a substantial amount from Erie, and Erie, as one of the earliest colonies, had one of the most developed export economies in the whole Colonial Union.

The Colonial Union trade representative for Erie had asked what the problem was. No problem, Erie (or more accurately its governor for trade) said. We've decided to get out of the export business.

The Colonial Union trade representative pointed out that doing so would trash Erie's economy. Erie's governor for trade noted that its economists said that the change would be difficult but weatherable as long as everyone made certain sacrifices.

The Colonial Union trade representative offered to raise the amount it offered for goods. Erie's governor for trade politely declined.

The Colonial Union trade representative hinted that not doing business with them was tantamount to treason. Erie's governor for trade asked what particular Colonial Union statute covered enforced, involuntary trade.

The Colonial Union trade representative then made a crack about the entire planet lying down on the job.

This is stupid, Powell said.

As stupid as the Colonial Union trade representative? I asked.

Close, Powell replied. *We're wasting our time here, boss. We're not stopping anything, or saving anyone, or doing any good. We're just walking around a bunch of people lying down, waving our Empees around like assholes.*

They could spring up and attack us all.

Lieutenant, I've got a guy two meters from me who is fucking snoring.

I smiled at this. *What do you suggest we do, Ilse?* I asked.

I have no idea. I'm open to suggestion.

Okay, try this one on, I said, dropped my Empee, and walked out into the crowd.

What are you doing? Powell asked.

Leaving, I said. I began to navigate around the prone bodies so I wouldn't step on any.

Where to?

I have no idea.

I don't think we're allowed to do that, boss. I think the technical term for what you're doing is "desertion."

They can shoot me if they want.

They might!

Ilse, I said, stopped, and looked back. *I've been doing this for seven years. You know as well as I do that they're not going to let me stop. They've stopped rotating us out because there are no more of us coming in. But I can't do this anymore. I'm done.* I turned and started walking again.

They will definitely shoot you.

They might, I agreed, echoing her earlier words. I made my way through the plaza and down to one of the side streets. I turned and looked back at Powell.

It's not like they won't know where you are, she said to me. *You have a computer in your brain. It tracks your every movement. Hell, I'm pretty sure it can track your every thought.*

I know.

They'll come get you.

They probably will.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

I won't.

What will you do?

I used to be a pretty good musician, I said. *I think I'd like to do that again. For a while, anyway.*

You're nuts, Lieutenant. I want it out there on the record that I said that.

Duly noted. Want to join me?

Hell, no, Powell said. *We can't all be deserters. And anyway there's a lieutenant position opening up. I think I'm in line for a promotion.*

I grinned. *Good-bye, Ilse,* I said.

Good-bye, Heather, she said, and then she waved.

I turned the corner and a building hid her from my view.

I walked down the street, found another street that looked interesting, and started walking down it into the first day of another life.

I think it was a Saturday.

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TO STAND OR FALL

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To the Committee and attendees of Swancon 40, in Perth, Australia, where this novella—and book—was completed. Hey, didn't I say I would do this?

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PART ONE

There's a saying: "May you live in interesting times."

To begin, it's a curse. "Interesting" in this case uniformly means "Oh god, death is raining down upon us and we shall all perish wailing and possibly on fire." If someone wanted to say something nice to you, they wouldn't tell you to live in "interesting" times. They would say something like, "I wish you eternal happiness" or "May you have peace" or "Live long and prosper" and so on. They wouldn't say "Live in interesting times." If someone is telling you to live in interesting times, they are basically telling you they want you to die horribly, and to suffer terribly before you do.

Seriously, they are not your friend. This is a tip I am giving you for free.

Second, the curse is almost always ascribed to the Chinese, which is a flat-out lie. As far as anyone can tell it appeared in English first but was ascribed to the Chinese, probably due to a combination of casual racism and because someone wanted to be a shithole of a human being but didn't want it to be marked down against them personally. A sort of "Hey, *I'm* not saying this, those terrible Chinese are saying it, I'm just telling you what *they* said" maneuver.

So not only are they not your friend, they may be also a bigot and passive-aggressive.

That said, the Chinese do have a saying from which it is alleged that the bigoted passive-aggressive curse may have been derived: "□□□□□□□□□□□," which, roughly translated, means "It's better to be a dog in peace, than a man in war." Which is a maxim which is neither bigoted nor passive-aggressive, and about which I find a lot to agree with.

The point is this: My name is Lieutenant Harry Wilson. I've been a man in war for a very long time now. I think it would be preferable to be a dog in peace. I've been working toward that for a while.

My problem is, I live in interesting times.

• • •

My most recent interesting time began when the *Chandler,* the ship on which I was stationed, skipped into the Khartoum system and promptly blew up the first two other ships it saw.

They had it coming. The two ships were attacking the *Tubingen,* a Colonial Defense Forces ship which had been called into the system to quell a rebellion against the Colonial Union, instigated by Khartoum's prime minister, who really should have known better. But apparently he didn't, and in came the *Tubingen,* which sent a platoon of soldiers to the planet to escort the prime minister off the planet. Which is when these other two ships skipped in and started using the *Tubingen* for target practice. I imagine they expected that they would be able to finish the job, unmolested. They were not prepared to have the *Chandler* come at them out of the sun.

In reality we had done no such thing, of course. We had just skipped into the space above Khartoum slightly closer in toward the planet's star than those two ships, and the *Tubingen,* which they were busy attacking. And the fact that we were, from their perspective, hidden in the disk of Khartoum's star did not give the *Chandler* any special advantage. The ships' systems would have detected us no later. What gave us an advantage was that they were not expecting us at all. When we showed up, they were giving all their attention to destroying

the *Tubingen,* firing missiles at close range to shatter the ship at its weak points, to end the lives of everyone on the ship and throw the entire Colonial Union into disarray.

But coming out of the sun was a nice poetic touch.

We had launched our own missiles before our particle beams touched the ships' missiles, detonating all of them before they could smash into the *Tubingen*. Our missiles jammed themselves into the hulls of the enemy ships, targeted to disrupt power systems and weapons. We didn't worry about the crews. We knew there wouldn't be any, except for a single pilot.

From our point of view the battle was over before it began. The enemy ships, only lightly armored, went up like fireworks. We hailed the *Tubingen* by standard coms and by BrainPal networking, to assess the damage.

It was significant. The ship was a loss; it would barely have time to evacuate its crew before its life-support systems collapsed. We started making room on the *Chandler* and sent skip drones back to Phoenix Station for rescue ships and crews.

Reports trickled in from the surface of Khartoum. The platoon from the *Tubingen,* tasked to bring the planet's prime minister into custody, had been shot out of the sky from ground-based defenses. The soldiers who had leapt from the shuttle to escape its destruction had been picked off by the same defense.

Only two soldiers had escaped unharmed, but between them they destroyed the defense installation, staffed with Rraey soldiers aligned with Equilibrium, the group who had wreaked so much havoc on the Colonial Union and the Conclave. They captured two of the Rraey from the ground installation, including the commander. Then they finished their original mission and brought back the prime minister of Khartoum.

Someone was going to have to interrogate them all.

For the two Rraey, that someone was me.

• • •

I entered the room where the Rraey prisoner of war had been waiting for me. The Rraey had not been shackled but a shock collar had been placed around his neck. Any motion quicker than a very casual and deliberate movement would generate a jolt, and the faster the movement, the more powerful the jolt.

The Rraey did not move very much.

He sat in a chair very badly designed for his physiology, but no better chair was to be had. It was positioned at a table. On the opposite side of the table stood another chair. I sat in the chair, reached out, and placed a speaker on the table.

"Commander Tvann," I said, and my words were translated by the speaker. "My name is Harry Wilson. I am a lieutenant in the Colonial Defense Forces. I would like to speak to you, if you don't mind. You may answer in your own language. My BrainPal will translate for me."

"You humans," Tvann said, after a moment. "The way you speak. As if you are asking for permission when you are making demands."

"You could choose not to speak to me," I said.

Tvann motioned to the collar around his neck. "I do not think that would go very well for me."

"A fair point." I pushed up from the chair and walked over to Tvann, who did not flinch. "If you will permit me, I will remove your collar."

"Why would you do that?"

"As a token of good faith," I said. "And also, so if you choose not to speak to me, you will not have to fear punishment."

Tvann craned his neck to allow me access to his collar. I removed it, unlocking it via a command from his BrainPal. I set the collar on the table and then returned to my seat.

"Now, where were we?" I said. "That's right. I wanted to speak to you."

"Lieutenant…" Tvann trailed off.

"Wilson."

"Thank you. Lieutenant, I—may I be candid with you?"

"I hope you will."

"While I do not wish to suggest I do not appreciate you removing this instrument of torture from my neck, allow me to note that the act is hollow. And not only hollow, it is, in fact, disingenuous."

"How so, Commander?"

Tvann motioned around him. "You have removed the shock collar. But I am still here, in your ship. I have no doubt that on the other side of this door is another CDF solider, like yourself, with a weapon or another implement of torture. There is no escape for me and no assurance that aside from this immediate moment, I will not be punished or even killed for not speaking with you."

I smiled. "You are correct that there is someone on the other side of this door, Commander. It's not another CDF soldier, however. It's just my friend Hart Schmidt, who is a diplomat, not a killer or a torturer. He's on the other side of the door primarily because he's running a recording device—an unnecessary thing, as I am also recording this conversation with my BrainPal."

"You're not worried about me trying to kill you and escaping," Tvann said.

"Not really, no," I said. "I mean, I *am* a CDF soldier. You may know from your own experience that we are genetically engineered to be faster and stronger than unmodified humans. With all due respect to your own prowess, Commander, if you attempted to kill me you would be in for a fight."

"And if I did kill you?"

"Well, the door is locked," I said. "Which kind of puts a damper on your whole escape plan."

Tvann did the Rraey equivalent of a laugh. "So you're not afraid of me."

"No," I said. "But I don't want you to be afraid of me, either."

"I'm not," Tvann said. "The rest of your species, I am afraid of. And of what might happen to me if I don't speak to you now."

"Commander, allow me to be as candid with you as you have been with me."

"All right, Lieutenant."

"You are a prisoner of the Colonial Defense Forces. You are, in point of fact, a prisoner of war. You were captured having taken up arms against us. You, either directly or by the orders you gave, killed many of our soldiers. I will not torture you, nor will I kill you, nor will you be tortured or killed while you are on this ship. But you have to know that the rest of your life is going to be spent with us," I motioned around, "and in a room not much larger than this one."

"You are not inspiring me to be forthcoming, Lieutenant."

"I can understand that, but I'm not finished," I said. "As I said, the rest of your life is very likely to be as our prisoner, in a room about this size. But there is another option."

"Talk to you."

"Yes," I agreed. "Talk to me. Tell me everything you know about Equilibrium and its plans. Tell me how you got ten human colonies to agree to rebel against the Colonial Union. Tell me what the endgame is for your organization. Tell me all of it, start to finish, and leave nothing out."

"In return for what?"

"In return for your freedom."

"Oh, Lieutenant," Tvann said. "You can't possibly expect me to believe it's within your power to offer that."

"It's not. As you've implicitly noted, I'm just a lieutenant. But this offer doesn't come from me. It comes from the highest levels of both the Colonial Defense Forces and the Colonial Union's civilian government. Disclose everything, and when this is all over—whatever this is, whenever it's over—you'll be handed over to the Rraey government. What they do to you is another kettle of fish, assuming that they have something to do with Equilibrium at all. That said, if you're especially forthcoming, we can make an effort to have it seem like we didn't know what an excellent intelligence asset you were. That we thought you were just some common military commander."

"But I am," Tvann said. "The scope of my orders were limited, and focused on this mission."

I nodded. "We were pretty sure you were going to try that," I said. "And who could blame you? There's no percentage for you letting on any more than you had to. But we know something you don't think we know, Commander."

"What is that, Lieutenant?"

"Commander, does this ship seem familiar to you in any way?"

"No," Tvann said. "Why should it?"

"No reason," I said. "Except for the small detail that you've been on it before."

"I don't believe so."

"Oh, believe it," I said, and then looked up toward the ceiling. "Rafe, have you been listening in?"

"You know I have," said a new voice, from the speaker. A translation, in a slightly different voice to differentiate it from my translation, followed almost immediately afterward.

"Okay, good," I said, and looked back to Tvann. "Commander Tvann, I would like to introduce you to Rafe Daquin, our pilot. Or more accurately, I would like to reintroduce you, as the two of you have met before."

"I don't understand," Tvann said.

"You don't remember me?" Daquin said. "I'm hurt, Commander. Because I remember *you* very well. I remember you threatening to blow my ship out of the sky. I remember you shooting my captain and first officer. I remember you talking with Secretary Ocampo about the best way to murder my entire crew. Yes, Commander. I have a whole heap of memories with you in them."

Tvann said nothing to this.

"Ah," I said. "See. Now you're remembering after all. This is the *Chandler,* Commander. The ship you took. And the ship you lost. Well, maybe not you *specifically,* but Equilibrium. We know you were on it. And we know you're not just some field commander. No, sir. You're a key member of the Equilibrium military. And your presence on Khartoum, leading the forces that shot our people out of the sky, isn't just luck of the assignment draw. You're here for a reason."

"How is it that you're here?" Tvann asked me.

"How do you mean?"

"Your ship thwarted the attack on the CDF ship that responded to the Khartoum rebellion," Tvann said. "How did you know? How did you get here to stop it?"

"We had inside intelligence."

"From whom?"

"From whom do you think?" I said.

"I'll give you a hint," Daquin said. "It's the guy I stole from you when I made a break for it."

"Secretary Ocampo has been very forthcoming," I said. "When Khartoum declared its independence, he suggested to us that there was a good chance that there might be a trap laid for any ship that responded. The *Chandler* happened to be near skip distance—and the Colonial Union didn't want to inflame things by sending a large contingent of CDF ships—so we got the call."

"Thanks for grafting those weapons systems back onto the ship," Daquin said. "They came in handy."

"Secretary Ocampo," Tvann said. "No doubt *forthcoming* because you've put his brain into an isolation chamber."

"You're not really going to go there, are you?" Daquin said. "Because I have news for you, pal. You don't have much high ground to stand on with that one."

"If you have Ocampo you don't need me," Tvann said, to me. "Ocampo has far more operational knowledge than I ever did. He was a primary architect of our plans."

"We know," I said. "We have all his records. The thing is, we also know *you* know we have all his records. You have to have assumed that once Rafe absconded with the secretary. Which means Equilibrium can't use them anymore. You have a new game plan, one that's being carried out on an accelerated schedule. Ocampo can make educated guesses. But we need more than educated guesses at this point."

"I'm captured," Tvann said. "They'll know to change their plans."

"You're not captured," I said. "You're dead. At least that's what they'll think. You and every other Rraey, obliterated beyond identification, and *before* identification. And you died completing your objective of luring the Colonial Union into a trap—and making it look like Khartoum was responsible for the attack. That was a nice touch, by the way."

Tvann was silent again.

"That's our communication plan—everything that's coming out of us is pinning it on the Khartoum government. So as far as Equilibrium knows, it's still game on for the latest plan. We'd like you to tell us the plan."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you better get used to walls," Daquin said.

"Rafe, why don't you sign out for a bit," I said.

Daquin signed out.

"You're not the first Rraey I've ever met," I said, to Tvann, after Daquin had departed.

"I'm sure you've killed many in your time," Tvann said.

"That's not what I meant," I said. "I mean that I knew another Rraey as a person. A scientist named Cainen Suen Su. He, like you, was captured by us. I was assigned to him."

"To guard him?"

"No, to assist him. We worked on several projects together with him as the lead and me following his direction."

"He was a traitor, then."

"I don't know that he would disagree with you," I said. "He was aware that in helping us, his knowledge could be used against the Rraey. Nevertheless he did help, and in the course of time, he also became a friend. He was one of the most remarkable people I've ever met. I was honored to have known him."

"What happened to him?"

"He died."

"How?"

"A soldier, who was also his friend, killed him at his request."

"Why did he ask to die?"

"Because he was dying anyway," I said. "We'd introduced a poison into his blood and the daily antidote he was given was increasingly less effective. He asked his friend to end his suffering."

"The suffering you had imposed on him in the first place."

"Yes."

"Lieutenant, if there is a point to this discussion of yours, I'm afraid it has entirely escaped me."

"Cainen was an enemy who became a friend," I said. "And despite the terrible thing we had done to him—and yes, it was terrible—he still chose to find friendship among us. I've never forgotten that."

"I do not think we will be friends, I'm afraid."

"I'm not asking for that, Commander," I said. "My point in telling you this is to let you know that, at the very least, I don't see you merely as an enemy."

"You will understand, Lieutenant, if I'm not convinced that this fact does anything for me at all."

"Of course." I stood up. "Just understand that it can. If you want it to. In the meantime, give consideration to what I've asked for. Let me know when you're ready to talk." I started for the door.

"Aren't you going to put that back on me?" Tvann said, pointing to the shock collar on the table.

"You can put it back on if you want," I said. "But I wouldn't if I were you." I opened the door, leaving Tvann to stare at the collar on the table.

• • •

"Are you going to kill us?" Specialist Ketrin Se Lau asked me. The two of us were in the same room I had previously been in with Tvann. The room had been reset. Lau was not wearing the shock collar; he'd never been given one.

"Lieutenant Lee promised you that we wouldn't, if her report to me is accurate," I said.

"That was her. You are someone new."

"Do you think we're going to kill you, Ketrin?" I asked.

"Humans aren't well known for being kind to their enemies," Lau said.

"No, I suppose not," I admitted. "No, Specialist Lau. We're not planning to kill you, or Commander Tvann." I watched as relief spilled over the Rraey's body. "In fact, what we're hoping to do, after all of this is done, is return you to your government."

"When?"

"I'm not going to lie to you, it's going to be a while," I said. "We have to get to the end of this current conflict. In the meantime you're going to be our guest."

"You mean prisoner."

"Well, yes," I said. "But within that framework, there's a lot of latitude for how you are treated."

"I don't know anything important," Lau said. "I'm a specialist. I was only told specific things about my own job."

"We know that you don't know anything above your pay grade," I said. "We don't expect you to know the secret plans of Equilibrium."

"Then what can I tell you that I didn't already tell your Lieutenant Lee?"

"I'm interested not so much in what you know as I am in what you've heard. Rumors and speculation and things like that. We're both soldiers, Ketrin. Although we're different species I think we probably share one thing in common: Our jobs are boring most of the time, so we spend a lot of time bullshitting with our friends. I'm interested in the bullshit."

"I don't know that word, but I think I know what it means."

"'Bullshit'? Yes, I think you probably do. I'm also interested in you, Ketrin."

"How so?"

"Your experience with Equilibrium," I said. "Beginning with the very simple question of: How did you get involved with them in the first place?"

"That's your fault," Lau said. "Humans, not you specifically. Our wars with you went poorly for us, particularly after the Obin, who had been our allies, turned on us. When that happened we lost planets and lost power, and our military shrank. Many former soldiers were out of work. I was one of them."

"There are other lines of work."

"Lieutenant, when we lost planets, we had an influx of people to our remaining worlds. There were no jobs to be had. You and the Obin didn't just shrink our military. You killed our economy. I'm originally from a colony planet named Fuigh. We don't have that planet anymore. I was relocated to Bulni. Jobs there mostly went to native Bulnians."

"Got it."

"So when I was approached by a former commander of mine about Equilibrium, I didn't spend any time thinking about it. I was being offered a job and a chance to use my skills. The pay was excellent. And I got to leave Bulni, which I hated."

"I understand that."

"If you are planning to attack any planet of ours, let me suggest Bulni first."

I grinned. "It's not on our agenda at the moment, but I'll keep it in mind. How long have you been with the Equilibrium?"

"I don't know your time measurements."

"Tell me in your years, I'll make the adjustments."

"About six years, then."

"Which is about five of ours. Which is a long time."

"It was steady work."

"Right," I said. "My point is that we only started learning about Equilibrium very recently. It's a long time for your organization to be flying under our radar."

"Maybe you're not very good at intelligence."

"That might be it," I allowed. "But I like to think there's something more to it than that."

Specialist Lau did the Rraey equivalent of a shrug. "The organization was always small and focused and decentralized until very recently. For the first couple of years I didn't even know there was a larger organization. I only worked with my team."

"So you thought you were a mercenary."

"Yes."

"Being a mercenary didn't bother you."

"I liked being able to eat. And like I said I didn't have very many other options."

"So you thought you were a mercenary, but then you found out about the rest of Equilibrium."

"Yes."

"No thoughts about your team suddenly being made part of a larger organization."

"Not really," Lau said. "Mercenary companies are like any other company. Sometimes they work with other companies. Sometimes they merge with them. I was being paid on time and working with the same group of people, so it was all the same to me."

"And what about the philosophical aims of the Equilibrium? What did you think about them?"

"I was fine with them. I'm still fine with them. Lieutenant, the Colonial Union is our enemy, and the Conclave won't allow us to colonize, even on the planets we lost and want to retake. The two of you have made life very difficult for us. I don't mind returning the favor."

"All right."

"But you have to understand that at the level I work at, we don't really get into the philosophy of the organization. Do you, sir? Do you spend a lot of time thinking about the ethics and philosophy of the Colonial Union and what it does?"

"Actually, I do," I said, and smiled. "But overthinking things is a hobby of mine. I'm the first to admit I'm weird."

"My job was to manage communications," Lau said. "I spent most of my time thinking about my immediate tasks and the people I was working with. I'm not a great thinker, Lieutenant."

"This mission," I said. "It was with the same group you've been with since the beginning."

"No. The team I was part of was mostly wiped out when the *Chandler* attacked Equilibrium headquarters. I survived because I had been temporarily assigned to another team to train some new recruits. After that attack I stayed with that team, which Commander Tvann led. That's the team you obliterated."

"I'm sorry for the loss of your friends."

"Thank you. It's kind of you to say, even if I doubt you're entirely sincere."

"I have to say you're more forthcoming than Commander Tvann has been."

"I have a lot fewer secrets to keep," Lau said. "And I don't want to die."

"I know Tvann was not happy with you that you were willing to talk with us. That he tried to attack you to shut you up."

"Like I said, he has more secrets to keep than I do."

"I suspect he's unhappy with the level of loyalty you're showing."

Lau barked out a Rraey laugh at this. "You said it yourself, Lieutenant. I'm a mercenary. I have been since the moment Equilibrium hired me. Equilibrium pays well, but right now I can't spend a single coin of what they pay me. You, on the other hand, can kill me. I value my life more than all the money in the world."

"That's a very practical point of view, Ketrin."

"I was hoping you might appreciate it, Lieutenant."

"I do, very much. And I think you'll find that my superiors will appreciate it too."

"I was hoping that you would say that. Remember, there's only so much I know. I won't withhold anything but there are limits to my knowledge."

"Like I said, I'm interested in other things from you than I am from Commander Tvann. I think you'll be very useful."

"Then let's get to work," Lau said. "I do have one request for the moment."

"What is it?"

"Lunch."

• • •

"Do you know who I am?" Masahiko Okada asked, with just the right amount of outrage to his voice. The same room again, but a slightly different cast of characters. Okada was sitting at the table. I was standing against the wall near the door. The question was not directed at me but at the person sitting directly across from him.

"You're Masahiko Okada," said Ode Abumwe, Colonial Union ambassador, and also my boss.

"Precisely," Okada said. "And you know my position."

"Yes I do," Abumwe said. "You're a Colonial Union prisoner of war."

"I'm prime minister of Khartoum!" Okada said, voice shaking.

"No," Abumwe said. "No, you are not. You may have been, but that was before you acted in open rebellion against the Colonial Union. That was before you ordered ships to attack a Colonial Defense Forces vessel. That was before you ordered ground-based weapons to blast individual CDF soldiers out of the sky. Whatever you were before, Mr. Okada, right now you are a traitor, and a murderer, and a prisoner of war. Nothing more than that."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Okada said. "We declared independence from the Colonial Union, that's all."

"You declared independence from the Colonial Union and then hid in a secret location," Abumwe said. "Which surely suggests you knew the Colonial Union would respond to your independence and would

send forces to retrieve you. And when we did, we were attacked. Not by Khartoumians, Mr. Okada. By others entirely."

"*I* didn't authorize any attack."

Abumwe sighed audibly at this.

"I want to speak to Secretary of State Galeano. When she finds out what you and your Colonial Defense Force stooges have done to me, you'll be lucky just to be fired."

"Mr. Okada."

"*Prime Minister* Okada."

"Mr. Okada," Abumwe repeated, and I could see the mottled rage rising up Okada's neck and face, "you appear to be under the impression that by sheer force of personality, you will change your circumstances at the moment. That you will, by issuing demands in that stentorian campaign voice of yours, cow me to your will. You misunderstand my role here, Mr. Okada. I am not the one keeping you from returning to your previous, exalted status. I am the one that is keeping you from being turned into a floating brain in a transparent column of nutrient broth."

The mottled flush of Okada's cheeks disappeared, followed by something rather paler. "Excuse me?" he said.

"You heard me, Mr. Okada," Abumwe said. "You declared your planet independent of the Colonial Union, which was enough to have you labeled a traitor. For that alone you would be looking at the rest of your life in a Colonial Union prison, if they didn't simply decide to execute you. But then you also attacked Colonial Defense forces. And the CDF doesn't forgive the deaths of its people. It especially won't forgive them when it's clear that you, the prime minister of an entire planet, planned and coordinated the attack with enemies of the Colonial Union.

"The CDF won't kill you for that, Mr. Okada. What they will do is strip your brain out of your head and let it lie in isolation—horrible,

endless isolation—until you tell them every single thing you know. And then when you're done, you'll be sent back into that endless isolation."

Okada's eyes flickered up to me. I stared back at him, impassive. I knew what my role in the room was, which was to be the silent avatar of every horrible thing the Colonial Defense Forces would do to Okada. It would be an inappropriate time for me to note my own personal objection to the brain removal tactic, which I found frankly criminal.

"The *only* reason you haven't already been prepared for this operation is because I, as a courtesy owed to your former station, am offering you a choice," Abumwe continued. "Tell me everything you know, now. No hesitation, no omission, no lies. Start with your deal with Equilibrium. Share it all, and you will stay you. Or don't."

"I didn't authorize that attack," Okada began.

Abumwe shoved up from her seat, a look of genuine disgust on her face.

"Wait!" Okada held up a hand, imploringly. Abumwe paused. "We had a deal with Equilibrium, yes. But it was only for defense if and only if the Colonial Union attacked Khartoum itself. A major attack. A single CDF ship in orbit wouldn't have triggered it."

"But you hid yourself," I said. "You and your cabinet."

"We're not *stupid,*" Okada spat at me. "We knew you would come for us. We hid to delay you finding us, and to keep you from destroying infrastructure and creating civilian casualties when you went looking for us." He turned back to Abumwe. "We always knew we were going to be captured. We knew you would send a single ship for us, because we all know how the Colonial Union like to imply that it only takes a single ship to deal with any internal problem. We *wanted* to be captured. Our plan was civil disobedience. To act as an inspiration

for the other colony worlds who were planning to declare their independence as well."

"Civil disobedience doesn't usually include calling in outside forces to act as muscle," I said.

"It's one thing for me and my cabinet to participate in civil disobedience," Okada said. "It's another thing to leave three hundred sixty million people defenseless against the Colonial Union. Our deal with Equilibrium was defense and deterrence, not aggression."

"And yet they attacked anyway," Abumwe said, sitting down again.

"Not on my orders," Okada said. "The first I knew of it was when your soldiers blasted their way into our bunker and dragged me out."

Abumwe looked at me. I shrugged.

"I am telling the truth!" Okada protested. "I don't want my brain in a goddamned tube, all right? I was misled by Equilibrium. By Commander Tvann. He told me his role was deterrence only. Encouraged us to declare independence before the other colonies to set the example—and to make them aware that Equilibrium would protect them like it was protecting us. To encourage every colony to break free of the Colonial Union."

"So why did Commander Tvann do it?" Abumwe asked. "Why did he attack?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"We have and we will again. But right now I'm asking you. Speculate."

Okada laughed bitterly. "Obviously because whatever plans Equilibrium has, they deviate substantially from our own. What they are, I cannot even begin to tell you. All I know, Ambassador, is that I was used. I was used. My government was used. My planet was used. And now all of us are going to pay for it."

Abumwe stood up again, less dramatically this time.

"What's going to happen now?" Okada asked.

"We'll make sure you stay intact," Abumwe said.

"That's not what I meant. I meant, what's going to happen to Khartoum? What is the Colonial Union going to do to my planet? To my people?"

"I don't know, Minister Okada," Abumwe said. I wondered if he noticed that she gave him his honorific the one time he gave thought to those he was supposed to represent, and not just himself.

• • •

"We don't have a lot of time," Abumwe said to her current brain trust, which at the moment was Hillary Drollet, her assistant; Neva Balla, the captain of the *Chandler*; my friend Hart Schmidt; and me. All of us were crammed into that same small room. "It won't be long before Equilibrium discovers that their attack has failed."

"I don't think it did," I said.

"How do you figure?" Balla said, to me. "The *Tubingen* isn't entirely destroyed. The two ships attacking it were. The Rraey attack on our soldiers was likewise countered and the Rraey eliminated, except for our two prisoners. And Khartoum isn't independent. If anything it's just signed up for more direct Colonial Union oversight. There are twenty CDF ships on the way here now to make that point."

I pointed at her for emphasis. "But, see, that's the victory condition."

"Explain yourself, Lieutenant," Abumwe said to me.

"What does Equilibrium want?" I asked the room. "It wants to destabilize and destroy the Colonial Union. And the Conclave, too, but let's focus on us for a minute."

"Right," Balla said. "And they *failed*. Khartoum is still in the Colonial Union. It didn't destroy the Colonial Union."

"It's not just destroy. It's also *destabilize*," I said. "The CDF is sending ships not just to deal with the *Tubingen*'s survivors, but to exert control over a rebellious planet. You said twenty ships, Captain."

"That's right."

"When was the last time the Colonial Union committed that number of CDF ships to a colonial world that wasn't directly under attack by another species?"

"You're the one with the computer in your head," Balla said. "You tell us."

"It hasn't happened in over a century," I said.

"We've never had the level of uprisings we're seeing now," Hart said, to me. He looked around the room. "Harry and I talked to Lieutenant Lee, who led that *Tubingen* platoon to get the prime minister. She said that all of her previous recent missions were either stopping rebellions on Colonial Union planets or containing them if they'd already begun. That's new. That's different."

"This goes to my point," I said. "The Colonial Union is already destabilizing. Bringing in twenty ships won't help."

"I don't know about that," Balla said. "I think no one on Khartoum is going to start anything anytime soon."

"But the audience here isn't just Khartoum," Abumwe said, to Balla, and then looked at me. "That's what you're going to say next, isn't it."

"Yes," I said. "Because it's not. We know that Khartoum was one of ten colony worlds that were going to jointly announce their independence. Equilibrium got them to jump the gun for its own purposes. I think part of that purpose was to invoke an outsized military response on our part."

"But that would just intimidate the other colonies," Balla said.

"Or anger them," Hart said.

"Or inspire them to stick to their guns, as it were," I said.

"'Stick to their guns' is a curious phrase to use," Balla said. "Because they don't have any. The Colonial Union has all the

weaponry on its side. Whether they're inspired or angry or both, the colonies can't miss the Colonial Union's message that the party's over."

I glanced over to Abumwe.

"Unless Equilibrium has been talking to these other colonies as well," she said.

"Right," I said. "Equilibrium is small so it has to maximize its impact. It has to go for gestures that make a splash. It's something they learned from us."

"How so?" Abumwe asked.

"Like when we fought the Conclave over Roanoke," I said. "It's four hundred alien races, all with their own military reach. We couldn't possibly take them on ship-to-ship. So when we wanted to destroy it, we lured them into a trap we devised, destroyed their grand fleet by subterfuge, and waited for the fallout to take down the Conclave."

"There is the minor detail that the plan didn't work," Balla said. "The Conclave survived."

"But the Conclave wasn't the same after that," I pointed out. "Before Roanoke, the Conclave was this dauntingly large force that was impossible to fight. After Roanoke, there was an open rebellion and there was the first assassination attempt on General Gau, their leader. Those tensions never went away, and Gau was in fact later assassinated. We were there for it. You can lay out a path from Roanoke to Gau's death. The Conclave today is what the Colonial Union made it. Which also means in some way the Colonial Union helped create the conditions that make Equilibrium possible."

"And now Equilibrium is shaping the Colonial Union," Abumwe said.

"It's certainly making the effort, yes."

"There is some irony to that."

I nodded at this. "And the thing we have to remember is that it's doing it for its own purposes." I pointed in the direction of the very

small room in which we were currently keeping Khartoum's prime minister. "Okada and his government got sold a bill of goods by Equilibrium, which attacked us. But it's not Equilibrium who is being punished, it's Khartoum."

"When you lay down with dogs, you get fleas," Hart said.

"Yes. I'm not defending Okada's act. He and the planet wouldn't be in the position they are today if he and his government hadn't let Equilibrium through the door. But Equilibrium got what it wanted out of the exchange. More Colonial Union oversight means more resentment of the Colonial Union, not just here, but everywhere that finds out about it."

"The Colonial Union holds a virtual monopoly on information," Balla said.

"It did," I agreed. "It doesn't anymore. And, leaving aside the general philosophical issue with a single source bottlenecking every bit of communication for its own purposes, that presents its own problems."

"Like Equilibrium creating its own version of events here on Khartoum and presenting it to the other colonies," Abumwe said.

"Right again," I said. "Which goes back again to my point about Equilibrium maximizing its efforts. It doesn't take a lot for them to leverage mistrust of the Colonial Union into the appearance of being a fair dealer to the colonial worlds." I pointed to Abumwe. "You said we don't have much time. I think it's more correct to say that we're already out of time. Equilibrium is almost certainly already out there selling its version of events, and when it shows a feed of all our ships floating above the surface of Khartoum, that's just going to act as confirmation to the rebellious colonies."

"How do we know about the rebellious colonies?" Balla asked.

"The Colonial Union is not entirely without friends on the colony worlds," Abumwe said. "Or in their governments. We have had people

feeding us information for a while now."

"And we never did anything on it? We let it get to this point?"

"With the politics of the colony worlds the Colonial Union prefers to do things as quietly as possible, until they can't be handled quietly anymore." Abumwe shrugged. "It worked before, for decades. The Colonial Union is resistant to change. And at the top there's the belief that things can still be managed quietly. That we will be able to control the actions of the colonies."

"That's not working out very well at this point, Ambassador," Balla said.

"No, it isn't," Abumwe agreed.

"And we knew nothing about Equilibrium's involvement."

"Remember that one of the prime movers of Equilibrium turned out to be a highly placed member of our State Department," I said, to Balla. "It's entirely possible that what we thought we knew about the independence movements on the colony worlds was based on highly edited information. And once Ocampo was retaken, Equilibrium would naturally change tactics. That would be my guess, anyway."

Balla turned to me. "Have you always had this sort of paranoid mind?"

I smiled. "Captain, the problem is not that I'm paranoid. The problem is that the universe keeps justifying my paranoia."

Abumwe turned her attention back to me. "So, your analysis, paranoid or otherwise, is that this encounter was a success for Equilibrium."

"Yes," I said. "It wasn't perfect; I think they would have liked to have destroyed the *Tubingen,* killed everyone aboard, made it look like the Khartoumian government was entirely responsible for it all, and have us none the wiser for it. But as it is, they'll be able to sell their version to people who are receptive to hear it. Equilibrium's been working on a strategy of making us look deceptive and dissembling for

a while now. It works because we are, in fact, deceptive and dissembling."

"What's their next step, then?" Hart asked.

"I think that may be the lieutenant's point," Abumwe said. "They don't have to have a next step. They just have to wait for us to do what we always do, the way we always do it."

I nodded. "Why do the work to destabilize us when we'll do it for ourselves."

"But there still has to be a *point* to it," Balla said, to Abumwe. She turned to me. "Look, Lieutenant, I understand that you are deeply enthusiastic about this convoluted web of actions that you're spinning. I'm not going to say that it's wrong. But Equilibrium isn't doing this just for the fun of it. They're not nihilists. There has to be a point. There has to be a plan. This has to *lead* to something."

"It leads to the end of all things," I said. "Or less dramatically, to either or both the Colonial Union and the Conclave fracturing, and the return of every species in our local slice of space being constantly at war with each other."

"I still don't know why anyone would want that," Hart said.

"Because it worked really well for some people," I said. "Let's not lie, Hart. It worked really well for us. For humans. And more specifically for the Colonial Union. A system of government, stable for centuries, predicated on killing the shit out of everyone else and taking their land. That's practically the modus operandi of every successful human civilization to date. No wonder some of us wanted to return to it, even at the risk of destroying the Colonial Union itself. Because if we got back, we'd be meaner than ever before."

"Unless we weren't, and were just wiped out instead."

"Well, there is that. You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs, but you also have to make sure that what's inside the egg makes it to the pan."

"I … don't know what that means," Hart said.

"It means destroying the Colonial Union isn't a trivial act for the survival of the human race," I said. "We might not have time to think up something new before we're wiped out."

"That's what I said," Hart pointed out. "More compactly."

"Whether or not it leads to the end of all things is not my concern right now," Balla said. "My concern is the next *specific* thing that Equilibrium is going to do, or wants to have happen."

"I think it's something to do with the planets that are planning to announce their independence," I said.

"I agree," Abumwe said.

"Okay, that's great," Balla said. "What, exactly?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Isn't that why you questioned those Rraey and the prime minister? To find those things out?"

"We found out a lot," I said. "Just not that."

"Maybe you should try again."

"You might be right," I said. "Specifically, I want to try another pass at Commander Tvann."

"You going to still try to be his friend?" Abumwe asked. "I don't see that being a very effective tactic."

"The point of the first session wasn't to make him my friend. It was to make him not fear me."

"And what do you plan to do now?" Balla asked.

"I'm going to introduce him to something he actually *might* fear," I said.

• • •

"I don't know what these are," Commander Tvann said, when I handed him a printout. We were back in the same room. I was beginning to get tired of the room, to be entirely honest about it.

"That's a printout of targets the Colonial Defense Forces are planning to hit sometime very soon," I said.

Tvann handed it back. "I don't read your language, and I'm not sure why you would want to show me confidential information in any event."

"Because in a way you were the inspiration for the list," I said, and handed him another printout. "Here, this one might be more readable for you."

Tvann took the list and read it. He read it a second time. Then he set the printout on the table between us.

"I don't understand," he said to me.

"It's simple enough," I said. "You are Rraey. The Equilibrium crew who you commanded were all Rraey. The crew which you commanded, which took the *Chandler* and killed its crew, were Rraey. The base from which Equilibrium operated until Rafe shot it up and rendered it unusable was formerly a Rraey military base, until your species abandoned it and the system it was in. You are seeing a pattern here, I trust."

"It's a false pattern."

"It could be," I admitted. "However, the top brass of the Colonial Defense Force doesn't think so. They're pretty well convinced at this point that the Rraey—your government—is actively involved with Equilibrium. It's not the only one, to be sure. We have enough evidence of that. But time and again we see Rraey participation in ways we don't see other species participating. It is, shall we say, statistically significant."

"You and the Conclave drove millions of us out of work and out of our homes," Tvann said. "Of course you will see lots of us involved in Equilibrium."

I smiled. "It might interest you to know that's the very rationale Specialist Lau gave for joining up. And I'm not saying it's wrong. I am

saying it's not an argument that's going to convince the CDF that your government isn't offering material assistance to Equilibrium."

I pointed to the printout. "So the CDF has decided to act. Equilibrium is difficult to find—it's designed to be that way, I know—so we've decided to stop looking and to go straight to the source, as it were. Those are the first-wave targets we're going to hit on the Rraey worlds. Mostly military and industrial sites, as you can see, but also shipping and processing sites. The plan is to make it more difficult for you to equip and assist Equilibrium."

"You'll also destroy our infrastructure and cause millions to starve."

"Our analysts agree with the first. Not so much to the second. That will happen with the second wave of targets, however, if Equilibrium keeps up its attacks."

"If Equilibrium keeps hitting you after your first set of targets, then it should be obvious that the Rraey are not equipping us."

"Like I said, we know the Rraey aren't the only ones chipping in with Equilibrium. But we think it's the primary one. And aside from the value of snapping off that primary supply line, we think it sends a fine warning to everyone else: You may be using Equilibrium to destroy the Colonial Union, but we're still strong enough to take you down with us."

"When will you do this?"

"The thinking is there's no reason to wait," I said. "The operation is in motion as we speak. In fact, some of the ships that were being tasked here at Khartoum are being reassigned to this. It's become the CDF's top priority now."

"It's genocide."

"I think you might be surprised at how little you and I differ in this opinion, Commander Tvann. But I have to tell you that I'm not the one you need to make that argument to. This is a discussion that's taking place far above either of our heads."

"No," Tvann said. "You wouldn't have come to me with this if there was nothing you wanted from me."

"I do have something I want from you," I agreed. "I want you to tell me Equilibrium's strategy for Khartoum and the other colonies. Tell me and convince me that this is something we can better direct our attention to than that list of targets." I pointed to the printout again. "You have no reason to trust me but I will make you this promise regardless: Help me convince them and I will do everything I can to shift their focus."

"What *can* you do?" Tvann said. "You're a lieutenant."

"I am," I said. "But I am an unusually well-placed lieutenant."

Tvann was silent, and, I suspect, skeptical.

"Commander," I said. "Let me be clear. The Colonial Defense Forces has made a decision. It's going to hit something, and it's going to hit something hard. And what it's going to hit is whatever is directly in front of it. Right now, that's the Rraey planets. You know that the CDF is weaker than it used to be. But the Rraey are weaker even than that, and when the CDF hits your people, it's going to knock them back as close to the Stone Age as possible. A lot of your people are going to suffer. The only way this doesn't happen—the *only* way, Commander—is if we have something else to hit instead. Give me something else they can hit. Help me, Commander."

An hour later I emerged from the room. Hart was waiting for me, along with a pair of CDF soldiers waiting to escort Tvann back to the brig.

"You got everything you needed?" he asked.

"What, you weren't out here recording?"

"After you mocked me for it the last time I decided there were other things I could be doing with my time."

"Yes, I think I got everything I needed." I nodded to the soldiers, who entered the room. I motioned to Hart to walk with me.

“He didn’t catch on.”

“That I was bluffing about the Rraey targets? No. I sold it well enough. It helps that it was exactly the sort of thing the CDF would do.”

“So now what?”

“So now we go tell Abumwe,” I said. “And then, I suspect, we head back to Phoenix Station and tell a whole bunch of other people. And then maybe find a hole to hide in.”

“Why? I thought Tvann told you what Equilibrium is planning.”

“He did,” I said.

“Well? And?”

I stopped and turned to look at my friend. “And if everything he told me is true, Hart, then we’re all kind of magnificently fucked.”

I started walking again. Hart stayed stationary, staring at me as I walked away.

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PART TWO

"The organization known as Equilibrium is dedicated to bringing about the end of the Colonial Union," Ambassador Abumwe said. "We know this. But we should be aware that the end of the Colonial Union is not the only goal of Equilibrium—indeed it's not the primary goal. The primary goal is the dissolution of the Conclave, the largest single government this part of space has ever seen. To this end, Equilibrium is using the Colonial Union as a tool, and not just the Colonial Union, but Earth as well."

Abumwe was speaking from the well of one of the State Department lecture theaters at Phoenix Station. This particular theater could easily seat a couple hundred people, but at the moment held just four: Abumwe in the well, me sitting off to the side, and Colonels Abel Rigney and Liz Egan front row center, facing Abumwe.

Egan's formal title was Colonial Defense Forces liaison to the Colonial Union's Department of State, but in the aftermath of Assistant Secretary Ocampo's betrayal of the CU, she had stepped into the role of ad hoc number two at State, someone trusted by both the secretary of state and the CDF brass. The closer entwining of those two entities should have filled any rational person with a sense of foreboding, but at the moment no one seemed to blink. This was in itself a commentary of the state the Colonial Union was in at the moment.

Colonel Abel Rigney, I think, didn't have an actual title. He was just That Guy in the CDF: the one that went everywhere, saw everything, advised everyone, and was privy to it all. Honestly, if you wanted to cripple the CDF—and by extension the Colonial Union—all you would have to do is put a bullet into his temple. I suspect entire chunks of the Colonial Union government would simply stop working because no one would know who to talk to without Rigney acting as intermediary.

Officially, Egan and Rigney were mid-level apparatchiks at best. Unofficially, they were the people you talked to when a thing needed to be done, whatever thing it was.

We had a thing that needed to be done.

"You're saying that what happened at Khartoum is not meant to be a direct attack on the Colonial Union," Egan said, to Abumwe.

"No, of course it was a direct attack," Abumwe replied, in the straight-ahead, blunt manner that if you were not smart, you would think was profoundly nondiplomatic. "The act served its own short-term goal in that regard. But its true value to Equilibrium is long term—what it allows the organization to build towards for its ultimate goal: the destruction of the Conclave."

"Walk us through it, Ambassador," Rigney said.

"At Khartoum, we secured a high-value prisoner, a Commander Tvann of Equilibrium." A very slight smile crossed Abumwe's face. "The best way to describe him is as the Equilibrium equivalent of *you,* Colonel Rigney. Someone who is very well connected and often at the center of Equilibrium plans."

"All right."

The ambassador nodded in my direction. "During interrogation, Lieutenant Wilson here got Tvann to reveal Equilibrium's most recent plan, which begins with the attack on the *Tubingen* above Khartoum."

Colonels Rigney and Egan looked over to me. "'Interrogation,' Lieutenant?" Egan said to me.

I understood the implication. "The information was not secured under torture or duress," I said. "I used misdirection and false information to convince him that it was in his interest to cooperate."

"What false information?"

"I told him we were going to obliterate every major Rraey city and industrial site on four different planets because we believe the Rraey are the primary movers behind Equilibrium."

"Are they?"

"I don't have the data to speculate," I said. "If you were asking me to go with my gut, I'd say the Rraey government offers clandestine logistical support that's difficult to prove. Certainly the Rraey wouldn't mind if we were out of the way. Even if they are offering support, however, going after the Rraey at this point won't make a difference in the immediate plans of Equilibrium. Equilibrium is and should be our primary concern at the moment."

Egan nodded and looked back to Abumwe. "Continue," she said.

"Khartoum is one of ten colonies who conspired to declare independence from the Colonial Union. The plan was to do it simultaneously and in doing so give the Colonial Union too many targets against which to effectively retaliate. The longer it took us to respond to the event, the more colonial worlds would be inspired to also declare independence. The idea here is that dissolution of the Colonial Union would succeed in part because the CU would lack the resources to deal with the mass exodus.

"However, Colonel Tvann convinced the government of Khartoum to announce its independence early, arguing that it could act as the catalyst for the dissolution of the Colonial Union alone, and that Equilibrium would effectively serve as Khartoum's defense forces. That

would benefit both Khartoum and Equilibrium, which wanted to be seen as an ally to the newly independent colonies."

"That didn't work out," Rigney said, dryly.

"No," Abumwe agreed. "In fact, Equilibrium's true plan was to attack any CDF ship which responded—which it did with the *Tubingen*. The attack, whether it was seen by the Colonial Union as directed by Khartoum or by Equilibrium, would result in a massive response by the CDF—which it did. We sent twenty ships to Khartoum.

"Equilibrium did this for the specific purpose of massively militarizing the Colonial Union response to our planets declaring independence. The next planet or planets which declare will not receive a visit from a single CDF ship as they would have done before. Instead the CDF will send a fleet to any planet, with the specific intent of overwhelming any independence movement from the beginning." Abumwe stopped for a second and looked at Egan and Rigney curiously. "Is this Equilibrium assessment accurate?"

The two colonels looked uncomfortable. "It might be," Rigney said, eventually.

Abumwe nodded. "Equilibrium, through its own strategy of misdirection and false information—and its campaign to establish the Colonial Union as an unreliable source of truthful information, aided by the fact that the Colonial Union is, in fact, deeply censorious of news between colonies—plans to encourage the nine remaining planets in the original independence scheme to stick to their plan and jointly announce. It will promise logistical and defense support, which it has no real intention of providing except for its own purposes, as it did over Khartoum. This will happen as soon as practicably possible. And of course the CDF will respond."

"And then what?" Egan asked.

"Once the Colonial Union is fully occupied with this independence movement and has committed a substantial amount of its military force and intelligence capabilities to quash it, Equilibrium attacks."

"Attacks the fleets over the rebellious colony planets?" Rigney said. "That's just stupid, Ambassador. Equilibrium can be effective with sneak attacks but their ships and armaments can't stand up to a prolonged battle."

"They won't be attacking our fleets," Abumwe said. "They will be attacking the Earth."

"What?" Egan said. She pushed forward in her seat, now intensely interested.

Abumwe glanced over to me and nodded. I connected my BrainPal to the theater's presentation system and popped up a visual of Earth, and above it, several dozen starships, not to scale.

"Equilibrium acquires ships by pirating them," Abumwe said. "The Colonial Union has lost dozens over the years. The Conclave and its constituent states have lost even more." She pointed into the graphic. "What you see here is a representation of all the Conclave-affiliated ships that we know have been taken and have not, as yet, been destroyed in battle. There are ninety-four shown here and we have to assume our estimate is low.

"According to Commander Tvann, the Equilibrium plan is to skip these ships into Earth space, destroy the planet's defense, communication, and scientific satellites, and then target hundreds of major population areas with nuclear warheads."

"*Nuclear* warheads," Rigney said.

"Where the hell are they getting nukes?" Egan said. "Who still uses them?"

"Tvann indicated that many of them came from the stores of planets now aligned with the Conclave," Abumwe said. "The Conclave doesn't allow their use as weapons, so they're supposed to be dismantled and

the fissionable material disposed of. It was a trivial matter for Equilibrium to insert itself into that process and come away with warheads and fissionable material."

"How many are we talking about?" Rigney said. "Warheads, I mean."

Abumwe looked at me. "Tvann didn't know all the specifics," I said. "The ones he seemed to consider standard yield would be the equivalent to three hundred kilotons. He said there were several hundred of those."

"Jesus Christ."

"They could do the same damage without nuclear weapons," Egan said. "At this point in weapons technology, using nuclear weapons is only a step up from using the longbow."

"The *point* is to use the nuclear weapons," Abumwe said. "Not just for the immediate devastation, but for everything else that follows."

"When the Romans defeated Carthage, they salted the ground there so nothing could live or grow there anymore," I said. "This is the same concept, writ large."

"Equilibrium would be slitting their throat by doing this," Rigney said.

"If you can find their throats to slit them," I pointed out.

"I think we would be *motivated,* Lieutenant."

"Colonel, you're missing the important thing here," Abumwe said.

"And what is that, Ambassador?" Egan asked.

Abumwe gestured up toward the image floating there. "That every one of the ships tasked to the attack is originally from the Conclave. *We* are meant to believe this is an attack not by Equilibrium, but by the Conclave. We're meant to believe the Conclave has decided that the only way to deal with humanity—to deal with the Colonial Union—is to destroy the source of its soldiers and colonists once and for all, so we can never get it back, either by force or negotiation. This is meant to be

the earnest of the Conclave's intent to wipe us from the universe forever."

Rigney nodded. "Yes, all right."

"We would blame the Conclave, refuse its denials, assume it was behind Equilibrium all along," Egan said. "We'd go to war with the Conclave. And we'd be defeated."

"Inevitably, yes," Abumwe said. "We are far too small to take it on directly. And even if all the colony worlds stopped fighting us for independence—or we crushed all their attempts at independence—it would still take us time to fully convert to the colonies being the well from which we draw our soldiers. And meanwhile elements of the Conclave would be agitating for our destruction, because whether the Conclave attacked us or not, we would now be a clear and present danger to it."

"We'd lose in a fight with the Conclave," I said. "But that doesn't mean the Conclave would win."

Abumwe nodded. "It wouldn't simply be about us attacking the Conclave. It would be the internal stresses the Conclave would face in being obliged to obliterate us permanently. It goes against every reason the Conclave was founded in the first place. It would be antithetical to the goals of General Gau."

"Not to mention that of the Conclave's current leader, Hafte Sorvalh," I said. "And she would be criticized relentlessly if she refused to deal with us. And no matter how capable she is—and she's very capable—she's not General Gau. She won't be able to keep the Conclave together through her own sheer force of will like the general could. It will fracture and die."

"Which is Equilibrium's ultimate goal," Egan said.

"Yes," Abumwe said. "Again, our destruction is part of its plan, too. But we are mostly incidental. We are the lever Equilibrium will use to destroy the Conclave. Everything the organization has ever done,

including the destruction of Earth Station, has been part of the drive toward that goal."

"I don't know how I feel about the complete destruction of the Colonial Union being a *side benefit,*" Rigney said.

"It should make you angry," Abumwe said. "It makes me angry."

"You don't look notably angry," Rigney observed.

"Colonel Rigney, I'm furious," Abumwe said. "I also recognize that there are more important things for me to be and do than just be furious."

"Ambassador, a question," Egan said.

"Yes, Colonel."

Egan pointed to the graphic. "We know Equilibrium's plan now. We know that it plans to use our colonies and our standard responses against us. We know it plans to frame the Conclave for the attack on Earth. We know its game, its strategy, and its tactics. Isn't this now a trap we can easily step out of?"

Abumwe looked over to me. "There are other complications," I said. "Tvann suggested to me that if it became clear the Khartoum strategy failed or that we had thwarted their plans with the other nine planets or informed the Conclave of the subterfuge, that Equilibrium may simply attack Earth anyway."

"For what purpose?" Egan said.

"Equilibrium doesn't appear to be fussy," I said. "It'll take half a loaf if it can't get a full one. What I mean by that is right now its optimal plan is to distract the Colonial Union, destroy the Earth, frame the Conclave, and let us destroy each other. But if Equilibrium has to take credit for nuking Earth instead, it will. Because it knows that an obviously weakened Colonial Union, an obviously weakened human race, will still force the Conclave's hand."

"You have to appreciate just how many Conclave species hate humans," Abumwe said. "They hated us before what we did at

Roanoke. They hate us even more after it. And some of them blame us for the assassination of General Gau."

"We had nothing to do with that," Rigney said.

"But we were there when it happened," Abumwe said. "We and humans from Earth. That's enough for many of them."

"So you're saying that Equilibrium is perfectly fine going with a 'Plan B,'" Egan said, bringing the topic back around.

"We're *already* on Plan B," I said. "Plan B went into effect the moment Rafe Daquin stole the *Chandler* and brought back Secretary Ocampo. This is closer to Plan K. Equilibrium has been very good at improvisation, Colonel. It knows its limits in terms of scale and makes them advantages. Taking credit for killing Earth is not the primary goal but it has its own advantages. It means that it has done something no other entity, no other power has ever dared to do: destroyed the planet that gave the Colonial Union its power. If Equilibrium plays its cards right, it could profit immensely from taking credit for killing Earth. It could gain new members and funding. It could become a legitimate power in itself. It could step out of the shadows it lives in now."

"No matter what, the Earth is fucked," Rigney said. "Excuse the language, but that's the gist of what I'm hearing from you."

I looked over to Abumwe. "There is another option."

"Tell us," Egan said.

"Before I do, a question for the two of you," Abumwe said. "Are we agreed that the goal here is survival, not a win?"

"I don't understand the question," Egan said.

"I don't believe that, Colonel," Abumwe said, and stared fixedly at Egan. "I think you know very well what I mean. We four in this room can indulge in the luxury of being utterly honest with each other. So we don't have to pretend that we don't know that the Colonial Union, as it exists now, is headed for collapse. If we're not destroyed by

Equilibrium or the Conclave, we'll tear ourselves apart. It's already happening.

"We don't have to pretend that we don't know the structure and organization of the Colonial Union itself is unsupportable as it's currently constructed. We don't have to pretend that there's any way we get the Earth back into the role it played for us before. We don't have to pretend that we are not staring our extinction in the face. We don't have to pretend that any petty victories or side goals are important right now. What matters is that we agree that what we do here now is for the survival of *us,* of humanity. Not the Colonial Union as it is now. But of our species. We four have to agree to this, or there is simply no point in continuing this meeting."

Egan and Rigney looked at each other. "We agree," Egan said.

"And this agreement will be supported how?" Abumwe said. "If we are agreed that we are talking about survival, are we also agreed that we do what it takes to allow survival to happen?"

"Ambassador Abumwe," Rigney said. "Tell us your plan. We'll tell you how we can make it happen."

"Very well," Abumwe said.

• • •

"Thank you for attending this meeting," Abumwe said, to the representatives of the nine colonies who were planning, in what they believed to be secret, to announce their independence.

"'Attend,' hell," said Harilal Dwivedi, the representative from Huckleberry. "We were just about dragged out of our beds and forced to be here." Several of the other representatives nodded in agreement.

"I do apologize," Abumwe said. "Unfortunately time is of the essence. I am Ambassador Ode Abumwe."

"Why are we here, Ambassador?" asked Neida Calderon, of Umbria.

"Representative Calderon, if you would look around at who else is here among you, I think you will have a good idea why you are here."

The low-level muttering and complaining cut off abruptly. Abumwe was now very definitely the focus of all their attention.

"Yes, we know," Abumwe said.

"Of course you know," Dwivedi spat. He was clearly of the "when cornered, attack" school of rhetoric. "You have the prime minister of Khartoum in custody. I can't imagine what you've done to him."

Abumwe nodded to me. I went to a side door in the State Department conference room we were in and opened it. "Come on in," I said.

Masahiko Okada walked out and sat down at the table with the representatives. They stared at him like he had three heads.

"Any more surprises, Ambassador Abumwe?" Calderon asked, after she stopped staring at Okada.

"In the interest of saving us all time, allow me to be brief," Abumwe said.

"Please do," Calderon said.

"Each of your worlds is planning to jointly announce your independence from the Colonial Union. The fact that each of you is in this room right now should indicate our awareness of your plans. We are also aware that each of your governments has been in discussion, either individually or severally, with an entity called Equilibrium, which has shared information with you and has, we believe, offered each of you protection against the Colonial Union when you declare your independence."

Dwivedi opened his mouth to speak; Abumwe hit him with a hard stare. "This is not the moment to offer up excuses or rationalizations either for your desire for your independence or your fraternization with Equilibrium. We don't have time for it, and quite bluntly at the moment we don't care."

Dwivedi closed his mouth, clearly annoyed.

"Equilibrium has been deceiving each of your governments," Abumwe continued, and motioned to Okada. "In a moment Minister Okada here will detail to you how Equilibrium deceived him and his government and attacked a Colonial Defense Forces ship with the intent to pin the blame—and the punishment—on Khartoum and its government, for the purpose of galvanizing your governments into action. Not for your purposes, representatives. Not for the freedom you believe you seek. But for its own agenda, of which your planets and their fates are mere stepping-stones.

"With that in mind, the Colonial Union is making a request of each of you."

"Let me guess," Calderon said. "You don't want us to declare our independence from the Colonial Union."

Abumwe smiled one of her very rare smiles. "In fact, Representative Calderon, we very much want you to."

Calderon looked uncertain for a moment and glanced around at the other representatives, who were equally confounded. "I don't understand," she said, finally.

"We want you to declare independence," Abumwe said again.

"You *want* us to leave the Colonial Union," Dwivedi said.

"No."

"But you just said you want us to declare our independence."

"Yes," Abumwe said, and held up her hand before Dwivedi could complain further. "We do not want you to leave the Colonial Union. It is dangerous for each of us. But we ask each of you to follow through with your plan to declare independence. We need for Equilibrium to believe that your planets are going to go through with the plan you've already arranged."

"And why is that?" Calderon asked.

"I can't tell you," Abumwe said. "Quite obviously your governments are not secure. We can't tell you everything."

"And what will happen when we declare independence?"

"The Colonial Union, quite predictably, will overreact and fill your sky with ships in order to intimidate you."

"I'm failing to see the benefit to any of us in this plan," Calderon said, wryly. She had, for whatever reason, assumed the leadership role for the assembled representatives.

"We want you to declare independence but not become independent," Abumwe said. "We will respond with the appearance of force, not force itself."

"You're asking us to believe that the CDF won't crush us flat."

"If we wanted to do that we wouldn't need to have this meeting," Abumwe pointed out. "No. I'm offering you a way out of that eventuality. Make no mistake, Representatives. Any attempt to leave the Colonial Union will be met with force. We cannot afford to have your planets leave the union, and at the risk of sounding patronizing, we are absolutely certain you don't appreciate the danger you are putting yourself into." Abumwe motioned to Okada again. "Minister Okada here can speak to this from experience."

"You want us to trust you. You might understand why it's difficult for us to do that."

"I'm not asking for your trust," Abumwe said. "I'm making you an offer."

"There's not much you can offer us, Ambassador, if you're already denying us our freedom."

"Representative Calderon, let me suggest that it's not freedom that you are looking for."

"It's not."

"No."

"What is it, then?"

"It's control," Abumwe said. "Which is what I am offering you."

"Explain," Calderon said, after a moment.

"You are all representatives to the Colonial Union government," Abumwe said. "I don't need to tell you how little that actually means in terms of how the Colonial Union is administered and its relationship to your home planets. At best you are responsible for the most minor of tasks. At worst you are ignored entirely."

She stopped to let her comment take root. There were nods among the representatives.

"That is going to change. It has to change. The Colonial Union will need to rely on the colony worlds more than ever, including for soldiers, which it has never done before. It can no longer rule from the top down. Bluntly, it will need the consent of the governed. It will need to be ruled by the governed. It will need to be ruled by you."

There was dead silence for a moment. Then:

"You're *joking,*" Dwivedi said.

"No," Abumwe said, looking at Calderon rather than the Huckleberry representative. "It's been agreed to in principle. At the top. What we need now is a group of representatives willing to do the work to create a system that reflects the reality of our situation with the Conclave and others, along with a truly representative government."

"You want us to draft a constitution," Calderon said, only a little incredulously.

"Yes."

"In exchange for this little act of subterfuge with our declarations of independence."

"Yes," Abumwe said.

"It's that important."

"Yes."

"We're going to need to consult with our governments," Dwivedi said.

"No," Abumwe said, and looked around. "I need to be clear about this. *There is no time*. We already know that you plan to announce your independence in as little as a couple of weeks. We need that timetable to continue. We need everything to run as if it's already been decided. There can be no pause, no hint that anything has changed. You are your colony's representative. Represent. Your decision here now will commit your planet and we will hold it to your decision. And one other thing: This decision must be unanimous. Either you are all in or none of you are."

"You're expecting us to create a viable system of interplanetary representative government right now," Calderon said.

This got the faintest of smiles from Abumwe. "No. Details will wait. But you have to commit now."

"How much time are you giving us?"

"You'll have tonight," Abumwe said. "I'll be here to answer what questions I can. Okada is here to tell you about Khartoum's experience with Equilibrium. It's eleven P.M. now. By eight, I will either need your unanimous agreement or your refusal."

"And if we refuse?"

"Then you refuse and everything becomes much harder and much more dangerous. For everyone," Abumwe said. "I'm going to leave you for a few moments. I will be back to answer questions presently." She walked out the side door I had brought Okada in from. I followed her.

"That was inspiring," I said.

"Of all the things I need at the moment, Wilson, your sarcasm is not one of them," she said.

"It's only partly sarcasm," I said. "Do you think they'll commit?"

"I believe Calderon is convinced. I think she might be able to convince others."

"And do you think the Colonial Union is actually going to agree to the changes you've just committed it to?"

"That's Rigney and Egan's department," Abumwe said. "But none of us would be here if we didn't already see the writing on the wall."

"True enough," I said.

"I need you to call in Hart Schmidt," Abumwe said. "I need him to take your place in the room. I will brief him on everything."

"All right," I said. "What are you going to have me do?"

"I have two things I need you to do," Abumwe said. "First, I need you to talk to Ocampo."

"What about?"

"The whereabouts of Equilibrium. They fled from their base but that hasn't stopped them from continuing their operations. We need to know where they are now."

"He might not know," I said.

"And he might. You need to ask him."

"You're the boss," I said. "What's the other thing?"

"I need you to go to Earth."

"Interesting," I said. "You know they don't like us, right? As in, if one of our spaceships shows up above the planet, they're likely to shoot it out of the sky. Not to mention it'll take me several days to get there, with no reasonable expectation of getting back, once they shoot my ship out of the sky."

"I expect you to solve all of these problems before you leave."

"I admire your confidence in me."

"Then don't disappoint me, Wilson."

• • •

Tyson Ocampo and I stood on a beach, watching the waves roll in and the seagulls circle overhead.

"It's beautiful here," Ocampo said, to me.

"I thought you might like it," I replied.

"Which beach is this?"

"Cottesloe Beach. It's near Perth, Australia."

"Ah," Ocampo said. "I've never been."

"Well, it's on Earth, so that's understandable," I said.

"Have you ever been?"

"Once," I said. "I went to Perth on business and had a free day. Took the train over to it and spent the day watching the waves and drinking beer."

Ocampo smiled. "We're watching the waves, at least," he said.

"Sorry about the lack of beer."

"Lieutenant, when you're not here, the simulation I see is of a small, square cell. It has three books in it, the titles of which rotate after I read them. I don't get to choose the titles. There's a single small screen on which is ported just enough entertainment material that I do not go entirely mad. Once a day they make a track appear so that I can give myself the appearance of physical exercise. My only visitor—aside from the occasional Colonial Union interrogator—is a chatbot which is not quite well programmed enough to give the appearance of being a person, and only serves to remind me that I am, well and truly, alone in my brain. Trust me. This beach is enough."

I had nothing to say to that, so we continued watching the simulated waves of simulated Cottesloe Beach tumble onto the simulated shore, while the simulated birds reeled in the sky.

"I assume this is a reward," Ocampo said. "For our last session."

"As it turns out, you were entirely correct that a trap was being laid for the CDF ship at Khartoum," I said. "My ship got to skip distance in a dangerously short time—we nearly overloaded the engines—and skipped directly into the attack. That was lucky timing."

"The CDF didn't send one of the ships it has on standby."

"With all due respect, Secretary Ocampo, you're a confirmed traitor, and you have a history of leading ships to their doom. They would not send their own ship, but they didn't mind if we played Russian roulette with ours."

"I'm glad you trust me, Lieutenant."

"I trust that you have nothing left to lose, Secretary."

"That's not quite the same thing, is it."

"No," I said. "It's not. Sorry about that."

Ocampo smiled again, and ran a toe into the sand of the beach. This simulation was about as perfect as I could make it, and from a programming point of view was in fact a bit of a marvel. The simulation was only detailed to the degree of Ocampo's attention. Any part of the beach he wasn't looking at was a low-resolution map. Any part of the sand that wasn't directly under his toes was an undifferentiated texture mat. The beach existed as a bubble of perception around a man who himself existed as a brain in a jar.

"Did you make this beach for me?" Ocampo said. "As a reward?"

"It's not a reward," I said. "I just thought you might like it."

"I do."

"And I confess I didn't make it for you," I said. "Rafe Daquin had a birthday recently. I modeled it for him."

"You still haven't given him a body?" Ocampo asked.

"His new body is ready," I said. "And he can move into it any time he likes. Right now, he's decided to stay with the *Chandler* and pilot it from the inside. He's really very good at it now. He's done some amazing things."

"I wonder how he would feel if he knew you'd given a gift you made for him to the man who caused his brain to be taken out of his body in the first place."

"Actually he was the one who suggested I do it. He told me to tell you he remembers how lonely it was, and is, to be a brain in a jar. He hoped this might give you some peace."

"That was very kind of him."

"It was," I agreed. I conveniently left out the part where Daquin told me that if I wanted I could program in a great white shark that tore

Ocampo's simulated body to pieces. It would not be convenient to the current situation. Rafe might have forgiven, in his fashion, but he had not forgotten.

"Lieutenant," Ocampo said. "As much as I appreciate a trip to the beach, I'm not under the impression that you're here because you and I are friends."

"I need a little more information from you, Secretary. About Equilibrium."

"Of course."

"Will you give it?"

Ocampo didn't answer this. Instead he stepped forward onto the beach, into the water that rushed up to surround his feet and make them sink just a little into the sand. Despite myself I smiled at this; it really was a good simulation that I had thrown together.

"I've been thinking about why it was I became part of Equilibrium," Ocampo said. He looked back at me as he said this and grinned. "Don't worry, Lieutenant, I'm not going to try to make this a monologue of disillusioned nobility that you will have to politely nod through. At this point I can admit that much of the reason I did was ambition and megalomania. That is what it is. But there was another part of it, too. The belief that the Colonial Union, however it had gotten that way, was antithetical to the survival of our species. That every other species we know had come to associate humanity with duplicity, savagery, ambitious cunning, and danger. That this is all that we would ever be to them."

"To be fair, none of the rest of them are exactly angels," I said.

"True enough," Ocampo said. "Although the response to that is how much of that is them dealing with us. The Conclave brought together four hundred species of spacefaring beings into a single government. We can barely get any to tolerate us. It does suggest the problem is not them, but us, the Colonial Union."

I opened my mouth to respond; Ocampo held up a hand. "It's not the right time to debate this, I know. My point is this, Lieutenant. For whatever reasons, I aligned myself with Equilibrium; independent of that, the problem of the Colonial Union remains. It's toxic to itself. It's toxic to humanity. And it's toxic to our survival in this universe. I'm going to help you if I can, Wilson. At this point there is no reason not to. But you have to understand that unless something happens to the Colonial Union—something big, something substantive—then all we're doing here is kicking the can just a little further down the road. The problem will still exist. The longer we wait the worse it gets. And it's already almost as bad as it can get."

"I understand," I said.

"All right. Then ask your question."

"After Daquin attacked Equilibrium headquarters the organization pulled out from there."

"Yes. The location was no longer secure, obviously."

"We need to know where its new headquarters is."

"I don't know," Ocampo said. "And if I did know definitively, they wouldn't use it, because they would have assumed that you would have extracted the location from me."

"Then I would like a guess, please."

"Equilibrium is a relatively small organization but the emphasis here is 'relatively.' It can operate from a single base but that base has to be relatively large and also recently abandoned, so that its systems can be brought back up to operational capacity quickly. It needs to be in a planetary system that's either friendly to the Equilibrium cause, or recently abandoned, or not heavily monitored outside of core worlds."

"That should cut down on the number of available military bases," I said. "At least that's something."

"You're limiting yourself," Ocampo said.

"How?"

"You're thinking like a soldier, and not an opportunistic scavenger, which is what Equilibrium is. Or still is, for the moment."

"So not just military bases," I said. "Any sort of base with the requisite infrastructure."

"Yes."

"And not just of species obviously aligned with Equilibrium."

"Right. They would know you'd already be looking at those. They'd want something that's in the Colonial Union's blind spot."

I considered this for a minute.

And then I had a really truly stupendously far-fetched idea.

My computer simulation must have accurately replicated my eureka moment, because Ocampo smiled at me. "I think someone may have thought of something."

"I need to go," I said, to Ocampo. "Secretary, you need to excuse me."

"Of course," he said. "Not that I could make you stay, mind you."

"I can leave this simulation running," I said.

"Thank you," he said. "I would like that. They won't keep it running for more than a couple of minutes after you leave. But I will enjoy it until then."

"I could ask them to let it run longer."

"You can ask," Ocampo said. "It won't make a difference."

"I'm sorry," I said, and despite everything Ocampo had done, I was.

Ocampo shrugged. "This is how it is," he said. "And I can't say that for all I've done I don't deserve it. Still, let me put a thought in your head, Lieutenant. If that idea in your head pans out, and all your plans for it succeed, then ask a thing for me."

"What is it?" I asked. I was concerned he would ask for a new body, which I knew the Colonial Union would never ever give him.

He anticipated that thought. “I’m not going to ask you to ask them for a new body. They won’t do that. Institutional forgiveness never goes that far. But I have a place, on Phoenix. Had it, anyway. A small summer cabin up in the mountains, by a small lake. It’s on a hundred acres of forest and meadow. I bought it ten years ago with the idea that it would be a place for me to think and write. I never did, because who ever does? Eventually I thought about it as a foolish investment. I thought about selling it but I never did. I guess I lived in hope I’d eventually make use of it. And now I never will. I won’t ever see that cabin again. Really see it.”

He looked back out, away from the beach, into an Indian Ocean that didn’t exist.

“If it all works out, Lieutenant, and you get what you want out of this whole adventure, then use your influence to get me that cabin, here, in simulation. I know that I’ll never be out in the real world. But if the simulation is good enough, maybe I can live with that. And these days I have nothing to do now but think. Finally, I would use the cabin for what I bought it for. A version of it, anyway. Say you’ll do that for me, Lieutenant Wilson. I would appreciate it more than you can possibly know.”

• • •

“Sedna,” I said.

Colonel Rigney, who was in the small conference room with Egan, Abumwe, and Hart Schmidt, frowned at me. “You’re trying to get me to use my BrainPal to look something up,” he said.

“Sedna is a dwarf planet in Earth’s system,” I said. “More accurately, it’s a dwarf planet just outside of Earth’s system, at the inner edge of its Oort cloud. It’s about three times further out from the sun than Neptune.”

“All right,” Rigney said. “What about it?”

"Ocampo said he didn't know where Equilibrium's new base was, but that they would likely take a base, military or otherwise, that was recently abandoned. And also one that we wouldn't think to look for. One that's in our blind spot."

I used my BrainPal to turn on the wall monitor in the conference room. The image of a small reddish planet popped up. "Sedna," I repeated. "It had one of the Colonial Union's oldest maintained science bases. We used it for deep field astronomy and for planetary science; Sedna's in a good place to observe Earth's entire system and the orbital dynamics therein."

"I've never heard of it," Egan said.

"The last couple of decades it's been largely dormant," I said. "It's had a basically caretaker staff of three or four scientists on a month-on, month-off basis, mostly to monitor some very long-term observations undertaken there, and to run the maintenance robots." I popped up a map of the base on the monitor. "But the relevant thing here is that during its heyday, over a century ago, the base was far more active. At its peak of activity there were more than a thousand people there."

"How do you know about it?" Hart Schmidt asked me.

"Well, and I'm not proud of this, back in the day I worked in the CDF's research and development arm, and there was a staff member I thought was a real asshole," I said. "I had him transferred there."

"Nice," Rigney said.

"He wasn't the only asshole in that scenario, I realize that now," I allowed.

Egan pointed to the base map. "We don't have a caretaker staff there anymore?"

"No," I said. "After Earth broke off formal ties with the Colonial Union in the wake of the Perry incident"—and here I allowed myself a small smile at the idea of my old friend precipitating the greatest political crisis the Colonial Union ever had—"we abandoned the base.

Partly for political reasons, since we didn't want the Earth to feel like we were lurking on their frontier. Partly because of economics."

"So, a large, recently abandoned base, dead square in our blind spot," Rigney said.

"Yes," I said. "It's not the only large, recently abandoned base that the Colonial Union or the CDF has, or that's out there generally. I'll create a list of sites we should survey. But if I were going to lay my money down on a site, it would be this one. We should check that out right away. Discreetly, obviously."

"Well, are you busy?"

"Yes, he is," Abumwe said. "I have another immediate task for him. I need him on Earth, right away."

Rigney turned to Abumwe. "And you were going to tell us about this when, exactly?"

"I just told you," Abumwe said. "Prior to this I have been babysitting nine representatives, getting them to agree to our terms."

"How is that going?" Egan asked.

"As well as can be expected. The representative from Huckleberry is complaining, but the representative from Huckleberry is a complainer. The others see the opportunity here and are working on him. We'll have an agreement on time."

"Good."

"And you will need agreement on your end, Colonel."

Egan and Rigney looked at each other. "It's in process," Egan said.

"That doesn't sound as optimistic as I would like."

"It will get done. Right now the question is how messy it will have to be."

"I'd still like to talk about Lieutenant Wilson going to Earth," Rigney said. "We can't send a ship there. Not now."

"I have a solution to that," I said. "Well, sort of."

"Sort of," Rigney said.

"It involves a bit of technology that we sort of abandoned a few years ago."

"Abandoned why?"

"When we used it there was a slight tendency to … explode."

"Explode?" Hart said.

"Well, 'explode' maybe isn't the most accurate term. What *actually* happens is much more interesting."

• • •

As I floated over the surface of the planet Earth, a thought came to me: *One day I'd like to visit this planet without having to toss myself down its atmosphere*.

The small wire-frame sled I was currently sitting in was the size of a small buggy and entirely open to space; only my combat suit and a small supply of oxygen kept the vacuum of space from eating me whole. Behind me in the buggy was an experimental skip drive, one designed to take advantage of the relative flatness of space at the Lagrange points of two massive objects, say, a star and its planet, or a planet and its moon. The good news is that the theory behind this new type of skip drive checked out, which meant that, if this new drive was reliable, it could revolutionize how space travel happened.

The bad news was that despite our best efforts, it was only 98 percent reliable for masses under five tons, and the failure rate went up in chartable curve from there. For a ship the size of a standard Colonial frigate, the success rate dropped to a very unsettling seven percent. When the drive failed, the ship exploded. And when I say "exploded" I mean "interacted catastrophically with the topography of space/time in ways we're not entirely able to explain," but "explode" gets the gist of it, particularly with regard to what would happen to a human caught in it.

We could never fix it, and the Colonial Union and the Colonial Defense Forces had a strange aversion to having their ships potentially

explode ninety-three times out of a hundred. Eventually the research was abandoned.

But there were still the small, very light vehicles we created with the prototype engines attached to them, currently stored in a warehouse module of Phoenix Station. They would be the perfect way for me to get to Earth both in a hurry—because I would only have to travel as far as the nearest Lagrange point—and undetected, because the sled was very small and could skip very close to the atmosphere of the planet. It was, in short, perfect for the mission.

As long as I didn't explode.

I did not explode.

Which, frankly, was a relief. It meant the hard part of my trip was over. Now all I had to do was let gravity do its work and just fall to the ground.

I unlatched myself from the sled and pushed off, getting distance from it. Its fate would be to burn up in the upper atmosphere. I did not want to be there when it went.

My own trip through the atmosphere was thankfully uneventful. My nanobotic shield held perfectly well, the turbulence was mostly tolerable, and my descent through the lower reaches of the atmosphere was smartly managed by my parachute, which landed me, light as a feather, in a small park on the Virginia-side banks of the Potomac River, outside of Washington, D.C. As the nanobots that comprised my parachute disassociated into dust, I reflected on the fact that I had become a little jaded about falling to the surface of a planet from space.

This is my life now, I thought. I accessed my BrainPal to confirm the local time, which was 3:20 A.M. on a Sunday, and to confirm that I had landed near where I wanted to be: Alexandria, Virginia, in the USA.

"Wow," someone said, and I looked around. There was an older man, lying on a bench. He was either homeless or just liked sleeping in

the park.

"Hello," I said.

"You just fell from the sky," he said.

"Brother, you don't know the half of it," I replied.

• • •

I came across who I was looking for several hours later, having brunch at an Alexandria restaurant, not too far from her home, which I did not visit even though I knew where it was, because, come on, that's rude.

She was sitting by herself on the restaurant patio, at a two-seater table near the patio's sidewalk railing. She had a Bloody Mary in one hand and a pencil in the other. The former she was drinking; the latter she was applying to a crossword puzzle. She was wearing a hat to block the sun and sunglasses, I suspect, to avoid eye contact with creeps.

I walked up and glanced down at the crossword puzzle. "Thirty-two down is 'paprika,'" I said.

"I knew that," she said, not looking up at me. "But thanks anyway, random annoying dude. Also, if you think butting into my crossword puzzle is a good way to hit on me, you should probably just keep walking. In fact, you should just keep walking anyway."

"That's a fine 'hello' to someone who's saved your life," I said. "Twice."

She looked up. Her mouth dropped open. Her Bloody Mary slipped out of her hand and hit the ground.

"Shit!" she said, flustered, at the spilled drink.

"That's better," I said. "Hello, Danielle."

Danielle Lowen, of the United States State Department, stood up as a waiter came to pick up her spilled drink. She looked me over. "It's really you," she said.

"Yes it is."

She looked me over again. "You're not *green,*" she said.

I smiled. "I thought it might make me stick out."

"It's throwing me," she said. "Now that I see you without it I recognize how disgustingly young you look. I hate you."

"I assure you it's only temporary."

"Will you be trying purple next?"

"I think I'll stick with the classics."

The waiter had finished cleaning up the spilled drink and broken glass and ducked away. Danielle looked at me. "Well? Are you going to sit down or are we going to keep standing here awkwardly?"

"I'm waiting for an invitation," I said. "When we left off, I was told to keep walking."

Danielle grinned. "Harry Wilson, will you have brunch with me?"

"I would be delighted," I said, and stepped over the railing. When I did Danielle came over to me and gave me a fierce hug, and a peck on the cheek.

"Jesus, it's good to see you," she said.

"Thank you," I said. We both took our seats.

"Now tell me why you're here," she said, after we sat down.

"You don't think it's just to see you?" I asked.

"As much as I would like to, no," she said. "It's not like you live down the road." She frowned for a moment. "How *did* you get here, anyway?"

"It's classified."

"I'm close enough to stab you with a fork."

"I used a very small experimental craft."

"A flying saucer."

"More like a space dune buggy."

"A 'space dune buggy' doesn't sound very safe."

"It's perfectly safe, ninety-eight percent of the time."

"Where did you park it?"

"I didn't. It burned up in the upper atmosphere and I did a jump the rest of the way down."

"You and your jumps, Harry. There are easier ways to visit the planet Earth."

"At the moment there's really not," I said. "At least not for me."

The waiter returned with a new Bloody Mary for Danielle, and she ordered for the both of us. "I hope that's all right," she said, of the ordering.

"You know this place better than I do."

"So you dropped in. Tell me why."

"I need you to get me in to speak to the U.S. secretary of state."

"You need to speak to my dad."

"Well, what I really need to do is speak to the entire United Nations," I said. "But for the very short term I will settle for your father, yes."

"You couldn't send a note?"

"This isn't really something I could have put into a note."

"Try it now."

"All right," I said. "'Dear Danielle Lowen: How are you? I am fine. The group that destroyed Earth Station and made it look like the Colonial Union did it is now planning to nuke the surface of your planet until it glows, and frame the Conclave for it. Hope you are well. Looking forward to rescuing you in space again soon. Your friend, Harry Wilson.'"

Danielle was quiet for a moment. "All right, you have a point," she said, finally.

"Thank you."

"That's accurate?" she asked. "The part about Equilibrium planning to use nuclear weapons against the Earth."

"Yes," I said. "I have all the documents and data with me." I tapped my temple to indicate my BrainPal. "The information is not yet one hundred percent confirmed but it comes from sources we can verify."

"Why does Equilibrium want to do that?"

"You're going to hate the reason, I assure you."

"Of course I'm going to hate it. There's no good reason to nuke an entire planet."

"It's not really about Earth," I said. "Equilibrium is pitting the Colonial Union and the Conclave against each other in the hope they'll destroy each other."

"I thought they had a different plan for that. One that didn't involve the Earth."

"They did, but then we found out about it. So they changed their plans to include you."

"They'll kill billions here just to make the two of you fight up there."

"That's about right."

Danielle glowered. "This is a fucked-up universe we live in, Harry."

"I've been telling you that for as long as I've known you."

"Yes, but before this I could still believe you might be *wrong* about it."

"Sorry."

"It's not your fault," Danielle said. "It might be the Colonial Union's fault. In fact, I'm pretty sure it is, if you go back far enough."

"You're not entirely wrong."

"No, I'm not. The Colonial Union—"

I held up a hand. Danielle paused. "You know you lecture me about the Colonial Union every time I see you," I said. "And every time I see you I tell you that you and I don't really disagree. If it's okay with you, I'd be fine with just having this bit of our interaction tabled as read, so we can move on to other things."

Danielle looked at me sourly. "I *like* ranting about the Colonial Union."

"I'm sorry," I said. "By all means please continue."

"It's too late for that," she said. "The moment's gone."

Our food arrived.

"Now I'm not hungry," Danielle said.

"It's difficult to keep an appetite in the face of global nuclear extinction," I said. I carved into a waffle.

"You don't seem to be having a problem," Danielle observed, dryly. "But then it's not your planet."

"It certainly is my planet," I said. "I'm from Indiana."

"But not recently."

"Recently enough, I assure you," I said. I took a bite of waffle, chewed it, and swallowed it. "The reason I can eat is because I have a plan."

"You have a plan."

"That's why I'm here."

"And you thought up this plan on your own, did you."

"No, Ambassador Abumwe thought it up," I said. "Most of it. I helped in the margins."

"Don't take this the wrong way—"

"This is gonna be good," I said, and took a drink of my orange juice.

"—but the fact it's Abumwe who thought up this plan is more reassuring than if you thought it up."

"Yes, I know," I said. "She's a grown-up."

"Yes," Danielle said. "Whereas you look like my kid brother."

"Despite the fact I'm older than you and Abumwe combined."

"Scratch that. You look like my kid brother's distractingly hot college roommate. And please stop telling me you're old enough to be my grandfather. The cognitive dissonance really ruins it for me."

I grinned. "You seem to be processing the end of days pretty well," I said.

"Do I?" Danielle said. "Yes, well. Rest assured that the moment the flirty banter stops I'm going to be well and truly losing my shit,

Harry."

"Don't," I said. "Remember, we have a plan from a responsible grown-up."

"And what does this plan entail, Harry?"

"Several small things, and one very big thing," I said.

"And what's that?"

"The Earth trusting the Colonial Union."

"To do what?"

"To save you."

"Ah," Danielle said. "I can already tell you *that's* going to be a tough sell."

"And now you know why I'm here instead of sending you a note. And why I'm talking to you first."

"Harry," Danielle cautioned. "Just because we like each other as people doesn't mean that my father or anyone else will listen to you."

"Of course not," I said. "But us liking each other, and me saving your life twice, is enough to get my foot in the door. And then the plan will take over."

"It better be a good plan, Harry."

"It is. I promise."

"What else are you going to need besides us trusting you?"

"One of your ships," I said. "And, if you're not too busy, you."

"Why me?"

"Because we're going to go talk to Hafte Sorvalh, the head of the Conclave. You've been head of a mission to the Conclave very recently. If we get an agreement down here, we have things to talk about to her up there."

"The Conclave's officially not talking to you right now."

"Yes, I know. We have a plan."

"Abumwe again?"

"Yes."

"All right," Danielle said, and got out her PDA.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm calling Dad."

"Let me finish brunch first."

"I thought this was a matter of some urgency, Harry."

"It is," I said. "But I fell from the sky today. I could use a couple of waffles."

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PART THREE

"Well, and here we are again," Hafte Sorvalh said, to the three of us. "And how completely unsurprising this seems to me."

Sorvalh's audience consisted of Ambassador Abumwe, Ambassador Lowen, and me, as their joint underling for the meeting. Sorvalh had her own underling with her, if one could genuinely call Vnac Oi, the head of intelligence for all of the Conclave, an underling. Sorvalh and the ambassadors were sitting; Oi and I, standing. I was doing a lot of standing in meetings recently.

We five were in her private study at Conclave headquarters. On the other side of the door, literally and figuratively, were ambassadorial staff and experts and advisors, from Earth, from the Colonial Union, and from the Conclave. If one was quiet, one could feel their combined howling frustration at not being in the room at the moment.

"May I be honest with you?" Lowen asked Sorvalh. I noted that I found it difficult to think of her as "Danielle" when she was on the job. Not because she materially changed her personality when she was working, but simply out of respect for her position.

"Ambassador, I believe the point of this current discussion is to be honest with each other, is it not?" Sorvalh asked.

"I assumed that there would be more of us in the room for this discussion."

Sorvalh smiled one of her absolutely-terrifying-to-humans smiles. "I believe each of our staffs thought the same thing, Ambassador," she said. "But I have always found that there's an inverse relationship between the number of people in a room and the amount of useful work that can be done. Now that I am the person in charge of things, I find it even more so. Do you not?"

"No," Lowen said. "I think you're right, by and large."

"Of course I am. And, Madams Ambassador, I believe that the reason we are here is to have a *definitively* useful meeting, are we not?"

"It is to be hoped," Abumwe said.

"Precisely," Sorvalh said. "So, no, Ambassador. I believe we have precisely the correct number of people in the room."

"Yes, Premier Sorvalh," Lowen said.

"Then let's not waste any more time." Sorvalh turned her attention to Abumwe. "You may begin, Ambassador."

"Premier Sorvalh, Equilibrium intends to attack the Earth with nuclear weapons and make it appear to the Colonial Union that it is the Conclave that initiated the attack."

"Yes," Sorvalh said. "Vnac Oi here gave me a précis of the report you prepared for us. I assume you are going to ask us for our help in thwarting the attack, seeing that we are meant to be blamed for it."

"No, Premier," Abumwe said. "We want the attack to proceed."

Sorvalh reared back slightly at this, looked over to Lowen, and then back at Abumwe. "Well!" she said, after a moment. "This is certainly a bold and unexpected strategy. I'm fascinated to learn how this will be beneficial to any of us, not least the poor irradiated citizens of Earth."

"Lieutenant," Abumwe said to me.

"We want the attack to proceed because we need to draw out Equilibrium," I said. "The group is small, driven, and has been difficult for us—any of us—to locate and attack. The one successful attack against the group as a whole was by Rafe Daquin, when he escaped

from their control. But other than that they've been very good at working in the shadows."

"Yes they have," Oi said. "We've purged known Equilibrium operatives, as I'm sure both Earth and the Colonial Union have." Abumwe and Lowen both nodded here. "But at this point they don't appear to need any additional operational intelligence to continue their plans."

"Or they simply have new allies," Abumwe said.

"Either way your man is correct." Oi motioned at me with a tendril.

"We found their new base," Abumwe said.

"Where?" asked Oi.

"On Sedna," I said. "A dwarf planet on the edge of Earth's solar system. We confirmed it just before Ambassador Abumwe's ship skipped here."

"Then this conversation should be about how you've wiped them out already," Sorvalh said.

"It's more complicated than that," Abumwe said.

"We know where their new base is, but their fleet—the fleet with which they intend to wipe out Earth—isn't there," I said. "They're showing cautiousness."

"So even if the Colonial Union destroyed the base, Earth would still be vulnerable to attack," Lowen said.

"That's why we need the attack to proceed," Abumwe said. "Draw out the ships over Earth, and simultaneously destroy Equilibrium at their base. Leave nowhere for either element to go."

"I'm still not clear how this involves the Conclave," Sorvalh said.

"We can't do both," I said. "Equilibrium will only act if it's confident the Colonial Union has no way to respond to their attack on Earth. We need to commit a substantial portion of our CDF fleet to give the appearance we're threatening the nine planets declaring their

independence. We need to be seen taking ships away from the skip drive line, to make it look like it would take days for our ships to respond to an attack on Earth. We also have to have enough ships to immediately respond to Equilibrium's attack, hidden where it would not think to look for them. We need to be sure we have enough ships to keep even a single nuke from making it to the Earth's atmosphere. That means generously overestimating the number of ships we need."

"So you'll need the Conclave to attack the Equilibrium base," Oi said.

"Yes," Abumwe said. "And we want you to allow us to hide a fleet in Conclave space, at skip distance, so we can respond immediately to the Equilibrium attack on Earth. We don't believe Equilibrium will look for our fleet in your space."

"That means trusting you not to attack whatever system we'd put you in," Oi said.

"You don't have to trust us," Abumwe said. "Put whatever protections you like on us. Just give us a place to park our fleet."

"And you?" Sorvalh turned her attention to Lowen. "It's still the general consensus on your planet that the Colonial Union engineered the attack on Earth Station and killed thousands, including much of your global diplomatic corps. You're telling me that the Earth trusts *them*"—she flicked a hand to encompass Abumwe and me—"to protect *you* from annihilation."

"It wasn't an easy sale, no," Lowen admitted. "This is where the Conclave comes in again. Our assent for this plan is contingent on your acceptance. If you don't trust the Colonial Union, we don't trust it."

"And what then?" Sorvalh asked. "What if I don't, in fact, trust it?"

"Then we give you everything we have on the attack," Abumwe said. "We give it to you and pray that, despite your recent actions, you are willing to protect the Earth. You did before. Your predecessor General Gau did, at the very least."

"We wouldn't do that out of the goodness of our souls," Sorvalh said. "If we intervened to the benefit of the Earth, you can assume that we would no longer be dissuaded from pulling it into our sphere of influence. So, Ambassador, you're asking me to believe that the Colonial Union could accept that. And even accept possibly in time allowing the Earth to join the Conclave."

"The Colonial Union accepts at this point that the Earth is lost to us," Abumwe said, nodding at Lowen. "We have told as much to the governments on Earth that will still speak to us. It will no longer be the captive source of our soldiers and colonists. We are now beginning to make the changes that will allow us to survive in this new reality. That being the case, we no longer factor the Earth's participation, voluntary or otherwise, into our plans. We do not want to see it as part of the Conclave. But better the Earth is in the Conclave than destroyed. It is humanity's home, Premier."

Sorvalh nodded and turned to Oi. "Your analysis, please."

"This is a lot, Premier," Oi said. "And from a people we have no historical reason to trust. At all."

"I understand that," Sorvalh said. "For the moment, treat the information given as accurate."

"Then leaving aside the moral issue of leaving a planet open to a genocidal attack, there's very little upside here for the Conclave," Oi said. "Both the Earth and the Colonial Union need something from us but offer no benefit to us outside the destruction of Equilibrium, which we could now attack ourselves and cripple operationally. They need us but we don't need them. And bluntly, there are hundreds of our member species who would be happy to be rid of either or both. There's still no way politically that we could bring Earth into the Conclave without tearing it apart."

"You're saying we shouldn't be involved," Sorvalh said.

"'Should' is a relative term," Oi said. "Remember that I am leaving aside the moral dimension of this for the moment. What I am saying is that if we *do* get involved, there is almost no upside to it for us."

"Except, perhaps, the gratitude of the two houses of humanity," Sorvalh said.

Oi snorted at this. "With no offense to our human friends here, Premier, I wouldn't set any great store in the gratitude of humanity."

"Too true," Sorvalh agreed.

"So you won't help us," Abumwe said.

"No, I won't," Sorvalh said. "Not without obvious benefit for me. For the Conclave."

"What do you want?" Lowen asked.

"What do I want?" Sorvalh repeated to Lowen, and leaned in toward the human ambassadors, accentuating just how large a creature she was relative to our species, and also, how exasperated. "I want to not have to think of you, Ambassador Lowen! Or of you, Ambassador Abumwe! Or of humanity. At all. Can you understand this, Madams Ambassador? Do you understand how truly tiring your people are? How much of my *time* has gone into dealing with humans?"

Sorvalh threw up her hands. "Do you realize that I have seen the two of you—and *you,* Lieutenant Wilson—more in the past two of your years than I have seen the representatives of most of the Conclave's constituent members? Do you know how much of my predecessor's time was taken up with you? If I could magically wish humanity away, I would do it. Instantly."

"It's a fair call," I said. Abumwe turned to look at me, incredulously, and I was reminded that not too long ago, she could hardly stand me. It might be we were about to be headed back down that road.

Sorvalh noticed. "Don't glare at the lieutenant, Ambassador. "He's perfectly correct, and I think you know it. It is a fair call. Humanity is

more trouble than it's worth. However."

Here the reluctance in Sorvalh's voice was palpable. "I cannot magically wish humanity away. I am stuck with you, both of you. And you with us. So. Here is what I want in order to help you."

Sorvalh pointed to Abumwe. "From the Colonial Union, I want a comprehensive nonaggression treaty with full diplomatic trade relations. Meaning no more of these nonsense back channels and saber rattling. Once we eradicate Equilibrium, we can jointly reveal everything we knew about it, end all speculation, and make the argument that a great deal of *our* recent hostility was manufactured by them. I can use that to push the treaty through the Grand Assembly, and you can use it to convince whoever it is you need to as well."

"You're asking me to sell the Conclave an ally," Abumwe said.

"Not at all. I don't think either of our governments is ready for that. I'm merely asking to no longer so actively and intentionally be at each other's throats."

Sorvalh turned to Lowen. "Likewise, a nonaggression pact and full diplomatic and trade relations with Earth."

"I don't see how we can be aggressive toward the Conclave," Lowen said.

"You can't," Sorvalh agreed. "But it's not for the Conclave's protection. It's for yours. From us."

"I understand."

"Good," Sorvalh said. "Finally, the same nonaggression pact and full diplomatic and trade relations between Earth and the Colonial Union. Because while for now I don't want you two merging back together, you entirely separated will always be a danger to the Conclave. For better or worse, for all our sakes, this division of humanity has to come to an end."

"It's a three-way stalemate," Oi observed.

"It's perfect," I said.

"It might be," Sorvalh said. "Thus are we all bound to each other in a mutual agreement to leave each other alone, while still keeping open actual lines of communication and commerce."

"It's a nice thought, Premier," Oi said. "There's just one problem."

"Everyone who is not in this room," Abumwe said.

"Yes," Oi agreed. "You said, Premier, that the more people involved, the longer things will take. This set of agreements will involve *everyone*. You're never going to get such a treaty through the Grand Assembly. And I doubt that Ambassador Abumwe will get sign-off from her people. And as for Ambassador Lowen, well. Earth doesn't even have a functional global government. She literally can't make an agreement that the entire planet will abide. This won't get done."

"Fine," Sorvalh said. "Then we don't let anyone outside this room have a vote."

"They won't like that," Oi said.

"Your head of intelligence is understating the case," I added.

"I don't care," Sorvalh said. "Everyone in this room understands this is a thing that should be done. We are all agreed to this. Yes?"

Abumwe and Lowen nodded.

"Then let's call it done," Sorvalh said.

"It's an imperial action," Oi warned.

"No," I said. "It's an opportunistic one." I turned to Lowen. "The Louisiana Purchase."

"You're speaking gibberish," Lowen said.

"Go with me here," I said, and looked at Sorvalh. "Back on Earth, a long time ago, a U.S. president named Thomas Jefferson was offered a deal on territory that would more than double the size of his country. The Louisiana Purchase. Technically speaking, he wasn't empowered to accept the deal—the U.S. Constitution was ambiguous about whether the president could authorize the purchase. But he did it anyway.

Because it doubled the size of the country, and then what was Congress going to do? Give it back?"

"We're not buying land, Lieutenant," Abumwe pointed out.

"No, but you're buying something else: peace," I said. "And you're buying it by mutually acting against Equilibrium, which exists to bring the end of the Conclave and the Colonial Union, and is planning immediate harm to Earth, with immediate consequences for the Conclave and the Colonial Union. So don't wait. Premier Sorvalh is right. Agree to terms here and now and present it as a fait accompli. Then get everyone busy with punching Equilibrium in the throat. We stand or fall together on this one. I prefer to stand."

"By the time it's all done, it's too late to go back," Oi said. "There's a new normal."

"It's not a bad idea."

"It's a *terrible* idea," Oi said. "It just has the advantage of being better than the other option."

"Is that your assessment as my head of intelligence?" Sorvalh asked Oi.

"My assessment as your head of intelligence is that the Colonial Union has consistently shown itself to be the greatest single threat to the Conclave, and Earth isn't much better," Oi said. "If you have an opportunity to take them out of your equation, then do it. If it means presenting this as a done deal that isn't able to be taken back, do it. You'll get pushback and criticism for it. But you may still have the goodwill of the Grand Assembly for holding the Conclave together."

"Oi, will this work?"

"You're the premier of the Conclave, madam," Oi said. "If you want to make this work, it will. When you can tell them about it, mind you. We need to destroy Equilibrium first. For *that* to work, it will need to be as covert as possible."

Sorvalh nodded and turned to Abumwe. "Can you agree to this?"

Abumwe nodded. “Yes.”

“Can you make it *stick*?”

“I will tell them they have no other option but to make it stick.”

“And you, Ambassador Lowen?” Sorvalh asked.

“You’re asking me if I can accept a deal that saves my planet from nuclear annihilation,” Lowen said. “I’m pretty sure I can sell it.”

“Don’t sell it,” I said. “Present it as sold.”

“Agreed,” Oi said, and pointed to the door. “When we walk out of here it’s done.”

“Yes?” Sorvalh asked.

“Yes,” Abumwe said.

“Yes,” Lowen said.

Sorvalh smiled, and it was terrifying, and glorious. “And so we learn how simple it is to change the history of the universe,” Sorvalh said. “All you need is for every other thing to have gone so horribly wrong first.”

She stood, with Abumwe and Lowen following her example almost immediately. “Come, Madams Ambassador. Let us announce our new era of peace together. Let us dare anyone to take it from us. And then, let us go to war together. For the first, and hopefully last, time.”

• • •

Two weeks later, on October second, using the standard calendar of the Colonial Union, and at roughly three in the afternoon, the Colonial Union received official notice from nine of its colony worlds that they were declaring themselves independent from the union. Each of these planets was independent of the others but declared immediate diplomatic relations with each other and offered the same to the Colonial Union.

In times past the Colonial Union might have sent a single ship per planet to deal with the uprising; when a planet has no real defenses against you that you yourself did not create, you didn’t have to make

that much of an effort. But since the *Tubingen* event over Khartoum, it was evident that there had to be a change in strategy, and in the Colonial Union's response to rebellion. Especially to a rebellion that involved multiple planets simultaneously.

The skies above the rebellious worlds added new constellations as a flood of CDF ships flowed into their space. Each rebellious planet received no fewer than a hundred ships—a piece of psychological warfare designed to cow and intimidate those trying for their freedom.

They would not be cowed. They shouted their defiance and dared the Colonial Union to do its worst.

This went on in a seemingly intractable manner. There was no clear end to the stalemate. The planets demanded the Colonial Union and the CDF withdraw from their skies. The Colonial Union replied that they would not. The large majority of the human military fleet was now permanently stationed above the worlds that it used to protect.

On October 21, a ship appeared in the skies above Earth, a trading ship registered to a world of the Conclave. It was the *Hooh Issa Tun,* and it had disappeared almost a year before. In a moment, the *Hooh Issa Tun* was no longer alone as another ship of Conclave ancestry appeared, and another, and another. A student of recent history would recognize the staggered appearance as a bit of theater. The late General Tarsem Gau, when he was the head of the Conclave, would do the same thing when his grand fleet appeared over the sky of an unauthorized colony. The Conclave would then give the colony the choice of being evacuated or destroyed.

The Earth would not have the same choice. The fleet would follow the same dynamic as Gau's fleet, waiting until the very last ship arrived, waiting until the audience below could register its immensity, before launching its weapons to destroy those watching below.

Which meant that timing was going to be a tricky thing indeed.

The satellites the Colonial Union placed in orbit around the Earth registered the *Hooh Issa Tun* the second it arrived in Earth space. The data was shot at the speed of light to a brace of very special skip drones located at the L4 Lagrangian point in the Earth-moon system, each carrying the prototype skip drive designed to work at those gravitationally flat spots in space.

Three of the drones skipped immediately. One of them arrived at its destination as a topographically interesting shower of metal shards. The other two arrived intact.

And in a space outside the solar system that housed Premier Hafte Sorvalh's home world of Lalah, two fleets readied their final preparations for attack.

The first fleet was a small one: ten ships, specifically selected by Vnac Oi. The second one was substantially larger. Two hundred CDF ships waited—had waited—for battle.

Back at Earth, the influx of ships had stopped at one hundred eight, a number ever so slightly higher than either the Colonial Union's or Conclave's estimates of the fleet. Their first action would be to begin disabling the Earth's network of satellites. This would take it several minutes.

The satellites marked the position of each of the fleet's ships above the Earth and shot that information to the waiting skip drones. Three of them immediately skipped. This time all three made it.

Inside the CDF ships, each of them was receiving a list of their primary, secondary, and tertiary targets. This transfer of information, and the acknowledgment thereof, took an average ten seconds.

Twenty seconds after that, every single CDF ship simultaneously skipped into Earth space.

Including the *Chandler*. Who alone among the fleet did not have targets. Its job was to observe. On the *Chandler* were Ode Abumwe, Colonels Egan and Rigney, and Vnac Oi of the Conclave. And me.

From Nava Balla's bridge we watched as CDF ships appeared less than a kilometer from their primary target ships and surgically attacked with particle beams and other relatively low-carnage armament, pinpointing propulsion, navigation, and weapons systems.

"Put the comms on speaker, please," Abumwe asked Balla, who nodded and did Abumwe's bidding.

The air was a cacophony of CDF ships reporting back, confirming their attacks were successful. In less than two minutes, the entire Equilibrium fleet had been disabled.

Disabled, not destroyed.

"Are you ready?" Abumwe asked Rafe Daquin.

"You know I am," Daquin responded.

Abumwe smiled at this. "Then begin."

"Pilots of the attacking ships," Daquin said, and his words were broadcast to each of the ships we had disabled. When we could make a reasonable guess as to the identity and species of the pilot of the ship, we automatically translated Daquin's words into their language. Otherwise we relied on the ships having translation software. "My name is Rafe Daquin. The pilot of the *Chandler*. I am like you. My ship was attacked and taken by an organization I learned was called Equilibrium. Equilibrium killed my crew and singled me out as a pilot. They took my body from me and forced me, like you, to pilot my ship alone and to do their bidding.

"We know that you have been forced into this attack. We know that you were offered a terrible bargain for your complicity: death if you refused and the promise of your bodies returned if you accepted. You should know Equilibrium never intended to return you to your bodies. To them you are disposable. You were always disposable. After this attack you would have been killed and your ships destroyed in order to preserve their goals and their anonymity.

“You may not have been made fully aware of the scope of your mission. It was to attack this planet, the planet Earth, with nuclear weapons. Those weapons would have obliterated life there and the lingering aftereffects would have made the planet uninhabitable. We, who are human, and for whom this is our home world, could not allow that to happen. We have stopped you from carrying out your mission.

“We have attacked your ships. We could have easily destroyed them, and you. We choose not to do this. We have not destroyed your ships. We have not destroyed you. We did not because we know you did not have a choice. We know because I did not have a choice when I was in the same position as you.

“We are giving you a choice now. The choice is this: Surrender your ships now, and we will care for you, protect you, return you to the Conclave, alive and intact, so you may go home, be with your families, and god willing, be given new bodies to live your lives.

“Some of you may already be trying to repair your ship systems to carry out your mission. If you do, we will have to stop you. If we have to stop you, we may have to destroy you. The weapons you carry have too much death in them. We can’t allow the launch of a single one.

“I am like you. I am still like you. I have stayed this way because I was waiting for a moment like this. So you would know, you would truly know, that you are not alone and that you are not without a choice. That you don’t have to kill in order to live. That your life can be returned to you, and all you have to do is spare the innocent people that an organization who has enslaved you wants you to kill.

“I am Rafe Daquin. I am like you. I live and I am no one’s slave. I am here to ask you to surrender now. Surrender and live. Surrender and let others live. Tell me what you will do.”

And then we waited.

For close to a minute there was dead silence on the comms.

And then.

"I am Chugli Ahgo, pilot of the *Frenner Reel*. I surrender to you, Rafe Daquin."

"Iey Iey Noh. Pilot of *Chundawoot*. I surrender."

"Lopinigannui Assunderwannaon of the *Lhutstun*. Holy shit, human. Get me the fuck out of this thing."

"I am Tunder Spenn. I pilot the *Hooh Issa Tun*. I want to see my family. I want to go home."

• • •

I helped Rafe write that. I just want that out there.

One hundred four of the pilots surrendered their ships. Two sabotaged their internal systems after attack and before Rafe sent his message, committing suicide, I guess from fear of what would happen if they were captured—or from fear of what Equilibrium would do to them if they were captured. One pilot had what could best be described as a psychotic break and was unable to surrender or indeed do much of anything else. We took the pilot out of the control loop of its ship before it could hurt itself or anyone else.

One pilot refused to surrender, managed to repair his weapons systems, and tried to launch his nukes. His ship was destroyed before the nukes were out of their tubes.

"You're going to get credit for this," Oi said to Abumwe, as the surrender notices came in. "You've spared the lives of pilots of dozens of Conclave species. They'll remember it. It was smart."

"It was his idea," Abumwe said, pointing to me.

"Then it was smart of you," Oi said.

"Thank you," I said. "But I didn't suggest it to be smart."

Oi dipped its tendrils in acknowledgment.

As the surrender notices came in we received the first news from the Conclave attack on Equilibrium's base on Sedna. The Conclave chose not to wipe out the Equilibrium members it found there. Instead it disabled the base's life support and communication systems and

destroyed any ship or vehicle capable of getting anyone in the base out of it.

Then the commander of the mission gave those inside the base a choice: surrender, or not so slowly freeze to death.

Most chose not to freeze.

In the coming weeks and months the scope of Equilibrium was revealed, its agents named, and its ability to wreak havoc on the Conclave, the Colonial Union, or Earth negated. In the end it was difficult to believe that Equilibrium could have ever presented a threat at all. But then it never would have, had the Colonial Union, the Conclave, and Earth not been so determined to be a threat to themselves.

• • •

"Interesting times we live in," Danielle Lowen said to me. She and I were at the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, in Washington, D.C. Hart Schmidt was with us, on his first trip to Earth—the surface of it, at least. He was determined to be the most touristy tourist who had ever touristed, and was presently snapping pictures of the statue of Jefferson from every conceivable angle. It was late March, and the cherry blossoms were beginning to bloom.

"You know there's a curse about living in interesting times," I said to her. "It's attributed to the Chinese."

"That's a myth, you know," Danielle said. "The Chinese never said anything that foolish."

I smiled at this. "Ode says hello, incidentally," I said. Ode Abumwe, who had retired from active diplomatic duty to take on a new role: primary architect of the new constitution that the Colonial Union was creating with its colonies.

"How goes the nation building?" Danielle asked.

"When I last talked to her about it she said it was an immense pain in her ass, but there was just no other alternative. Her deal with you

and Sorvalh, ironically enough, served to force the Colonial Union to accept her deal with the rebellious colonies. They couldn't accept a fait accompli agreement with the Earth and Conclave and not accept one from their own colonies. I think that's why she was appointed to run the discussions. The higher-ups wanted to punish her."

"The irony being that they're making her the mother of the new Colonial Union. She's going to be remembered forever for that."

"If she can get a deal."

"This is Ode Abumwe, Harry," Danielle said. "As if she's not going to get a deal."

We watched Hart take his photos.

"I can't help but notice you're still not green," Danielle said to me. "I thought this natural skin tone thing was just supposed to be a summer look for you."

"I've been busy," I said.

"We've all been busy."

"All right, fine," I said. "I also missed being this particular tone of me."

"Is this indicative of anything? Subconsciously or otherwise?"

"Probably not."

"Right."

"Fine," I said. "I might be thinking of retiring."

"Hanging up the superbody and aging like a normal, decent human should?"

"Maybe," I said. "This is only an idle thought."

"If nothing else, you can't say that the Colonial Union didn't get its money out of you, Harry."

"No, I suppose not," I said.

"If you did retire, where would you go? What would you do?"

"I haven't thought that far out."

"I have an opening on my staff," Danielle said.

"I don't want to work for you, Dani."

"I'm a terrific boss, and I'll brutally sabotage the career of any underling who says different."

"You should use that as a recruiting statement."

"What makes you think I don't?"

I smiled at this. Hart was now photographing the bits of the Declaration of Independence carved into the walls of the monument.

"Seriously, Harry," Danielle said, after a minute. "Come back to Earth."

"Why?"

"You know why," she said. "And you can now."

"Maybe I will," I said.

"*Maybe*."

"Don't rush me. I've got a lot to work out."

"All right," Danielle said. "Just don't take too long."

"Fair enough," I said, and took her hand.

"Interesting times we live in," Danielle repeated. "That's not meant to be a curse. I like interesting. I like it now, anyway."

"So do I," I said. She squeezed my hand.

"This place is great!" Hart said, coming up to the both of us.

"Glad you like it," I said.

"I really do," he said. He looked at the both of us, excited. "So. What's next?"

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AN ALTERNATE
"THE LIFE OF THE MIND"
Deleted and Alternate Scenes

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Introduction

The End of All Things took me longer to write than most of my books do, in part because I had a number of false starts. These false starts weren't bad—in my opinion—and they were useful in helping me figure out what was best for the book; for example, determining which point-of-view characters I wanted to have, whether the story should be in first or third person, and so on. But at the same time it's annoying to write a bunch of stuff and then go *Yeaaaaah, that's not it*. So it goes.

Through various false starts and diversions, I ended up writing nearly 40,000 words—almost an entire short novel!—of material that I didn't directly use. Some of it was recast and repurposed in different directions, and a lot of it was simply left to the side. The thing is when I throw something out of a book, I don't just delete it. I put it into an "excise file" and keep it just in case it'll come in handy later.

Like now: I've taken various bits from the excise file and with them have crafted a first chapter of an alternate version of *The Life of the Mind,* the first novella of *The End of All Things*. This version (roughly) covers the same events, with (roughly) the same characters, but with a substantially different narrative direction.

In an alternate universe, an alternate version of me went ahead with this version, and *The End of All Things* ended up being a rather different book. Which would be cool. I'd like to meet up with that John Scalzi and trade books.

Please note: This version of the story is noncanonical and mildly spoilery for the version that is, in fact, canonical. While you don't have to read the official version of *The Life of the Mind* to read this (or to

enjoy it), I recommend that you do to fully appreciate the compare and contrast.

Also, this version ends on a bit of a cliff-hanger. Which will never be resolved. Sorry about that.

Enjoy!

—JS

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PART ONE

The *Robert Anton* skipped into the Inhe system, near a small asteroid that in the not too recent past had served as a Rraey space station and repair dock. The Rraey had officially abandoned it, along with a substantial number of other territories, after a series of military political setbacks, contracting back to the species' core planets and systems. "Officially abandoned" did not mean it was not in use, however.

Control, sent Giovanni Carranza, pilot and captain of the *Robert Anton*. *This is the* Robert Anton, *requesting docking assistance*.

"Copy, *Robert Anton,*" said an artificially generated voice, the standard voice of Control. "You're some distance away. Can you maneuver any closer to base?"

Negative, Carranza said. *Engines are dead. Maneuvering jets are dead. Both died on the other side of the skip.*

"How did you get to skip distance?"

Inertia, Carranza said. *Burned the engines as long as I could before I had to take them offline. Saved enough energy to run the skip drive. It was a very slow trip*.

"Copy that," Control said. "Your status otherwise, please."

The Anton *is heavily damaged,* Carranza said. *Hull compromised, weapons systems partially destroyed. Communications work, obviously, but outside sensors are dead. I knew I skipped from timing alone. If*

anyone other than me were on the ship, they'd be long dead. We're a mess.

"Did you complete your mission?"

There was a hesitation. *Yes,* Carranza said. *The mission was completed. It wasn't pretty but it got done.*

"It's going to take us some time to get you back to dock," Control said. "We'd like to start analysis of your mission as soon as possible. Please send along your mission logs and recordings, as well as your damage report."

Sending, Carranza said.

"Thank you," Control said.

The Anton *took a beating. I'm not sure it's repairable at this point.*

"I'm looking at your damage report now. You may be right about that."

What does that mean for me?

"You don't need to worry about that right now."

You and I agreed that if this mission was successful that I would be done, Carranza said.

"I'm well aware of our agreement," Control replied.

I don't want the state of the Anton *held against me.*

"We asked you to complete the mission," Control said. "You did what we asked you to do."

I know it's been harder for you to get more ships. To get more pilots.

Control didn't say anything to this.

I would like my body back, Carranza said*. I would like to go home.*

"Don't worry," Control said. "We'll take care of you."

Thank you, Carranza said, and then died as Control signaled the release of a neurotoxin into his brain. The effect was instantaneous; Carranza had felt relief that his wishes would be granted and then he felt nothing at all.

The person behind Control waited until it received the signal that Carranza's brain was past any attempt at revival—not long at all—and then ordered tugs to bring the *Anton* into dock and crews to take what was salvageable from the ship before reducing it to scrap.

Carranza had been correct that it was harder to get ships recently, but the *Anton*'s useful days were done. As were Carranza's. Pilots were also hard to come by. But their usefulness was limited by their ability to believe they would ever be free. There would be no way for Carranza to believe that after today.

A waste.

But fortunately, a replacement was on the way.

• • •

"The time has come for treasonous ideas," said Otha Durham, from his lectern.

An amused murmur rippled through the corps of Colonial Union diplomats, assembled in one of the State Department's conference theaters. Durham, undersecretary of state for the Colonial Union, and speaking to the crowd on the occasion of an otherwise-standard assembly to award a medal to one of their number, smiled along with them.

"I know what you're thinking," he said, and then assumed the part of a bored diplomat in his audience. "Oh, God, there Durham goes again, pretending to have big thoughts and presenting them with *such drama*." He smiled again as laughs emerged from his audience, and held up his hands as if to acknowledge an affectionate criticism. "Fair call. Fair call. I don't think it's any secret that I've made dramatic statements a calling card of my career. But work with me for a minute here."

Durham looked out over his audience, becoming serious. "For decades—scratch that, for centuries—the Colonial Union has been charged with the role of keeping humanity safe and secure in our universe. A universe which was and continues to be hostile to the idea

that humans exist within it. Ever since we have made our presence known in space, other species and other powers have sought to remove us—to eradicate us. And if we know anything about humanity it is this: We don't go down without a fight.

"And so we have fought. Humanity has fought, for centuries, to earn and keep our place in the universe. The Colonial Union and the Colonial Defense Forces has fought that fight for our species, for centuries."

Durham shrugged, acknowledging the fact of centuries of near-constant warfare. "So be it," he said. "But where does that leave us, the diplomatic corps of the Colonial Union? We have existed all this time, alongside the Colonial Defense Forces, but as an afterthought, an also-ran—because not only was the idea that diplomacy with the alien races we encountered might be a useful tool ridiculed, it was indeed considered very nearly a treasonous thought.

"How can we seriously think diplomacy could work when time and time again the other species out here with us attacked us, killed our colonists, and claimed the planets and systems we had claimed for our own? In this light, how could diplomacy be seen as anything other than an abdication of responsibility for the species? How could it be anything other than treason?"

Durham looked out at the diplomats assembled before him, quiet now.

"Diplomacy as treason. Reaching out with an open hand instead of a fist, treason. The idea that intelligences that evolved on different worlds, in different ways and in different environments, might yet still find a common ground, treason. If you consider all these things almost fundamentally a betrayal of humanity, it makes sense that in the end, all you have left is the war. The fight. The struggle that leads to ruin, for one or both species."

And here Durham smiled. "But this is the thing," he said, and then motioned to the diplomats attending his words. "*We* know better. We have always known better. The Colonial Defense Force's battle for us is often necessary, and sometimes inevitable. But when the opportunity comes for the open hand rather than the fist that, too, is often necessary.

"And now, also inevitable. The Colonial Union has long—has too long—relied on the planet Earth to provide it with the soldiers the Colonial Defense Forces needs to fight our battles and enforce our will. But we no longer have that option. Colonel John Perry's appearance in Earth's skies with the Conclave trade delegation put our relationship with the Earth on hold; the destruction of Earth Station, the planet's sole egress into space, destroyed it."

Durham looked directly at Ambassador Ode Abumwe, sitting in the front row of his audience with her team, nodding to her in recognition of her presence on Earth Station when it was destroyed. Abumwe nodded back.

"The Earth wrongly blames us for its destruction, but right or wrong, we can't go back to what was before," Durham continued. "Now the Colonial Union will need to find soldiers from its own colonies, from its own planetary populations—a transition that will take time, and is already causing no small amount of unrest in the Colonial Union's previously peaceable ranks.

"And in the meantime, the formerly *treasonous* idea of diplomacy becomes the Colonial Union's primary tool. To make allies. To buy time. To secure our place in the universe, not with a weapon, but with reason. Diplomacy is now the primary resource by which the Colonial Union, and by extension humanity, keeps its place. What was treason has now become a treasure."

"Which, clearly and obviously, brings us to Ambassador Ode Abumwe," Durham said, lightly. Once again, laughter rippled through

the assembled diplomats. Durham motioned for Abumwe to rise and to stand next to him at the lectern. She did so. Durham's assistant Renea Tam also approached the lectern, wooden box in hand.

"Ambassador Abumwe, over the last year you and your team have found yourself at the center of a number of diplomatic storms," Durham said, turning to her. "When you could, you triumphed. When you could not triumph, you were able to at least find a silver lining to some of the Colonial Union's darkest clouds. We have asked a lot of you, and of your people. None of you have disappointed us. Time and again you've impressed us with your determination and your resourcefulness. Also, the fact that one of your team saved the daughter of the United States secretary of state from the destruction of Earth Station was no small feat." Another ripple of laugher. "The initiative your team shows flows from the top. It is your leadership that set the example, for them and for all of us.

"The Colonial Union owes much to you and your team in these difficult times," Durham said, and nodded to Tam, who opened the wooden box, revealing a medal and a framed document. "As a symbol of the regard of both the Colonial Union Department of State, and the secretary herself, it is my absolute pleasure to present you with the Distinguished Honor Award, for your exceptional and outstanding service." He lifted the medal with its ribbon out of the box and placed it around Abumwe's neck. The assembled diplomats applauded and Abumwe's team leapt to their feet and cheered. Abumwe offered up one of her rare smiles to them.

Durham held up a hand to silence the audience. "On a personal note," he said, and turned to Abumwe, "Ambassador, I have known you since you first arrived at the State Department. You were an intern and I was on my first posting, and that was"—here Durham intentionally mumbled a number—"years ago. Even then you were a smart, perceptive, driven, and serious person. The first three of these I

would never fault. They have taken you far. But I still believe that you are sometimes more serious than you absolutely need to be." He nodded to Tam again, who set down the medal box and reached into her suit jacket to offer a small object to Durham, who took it. "And so in addition to the Distinguished Honor Award, as a token of personal esteem, my dear friend Ode, I offer you this." He presented the object to Abumwe, who took it. It was a funny-shaped rubber doll.

"What do I do with this?" Abumwe said.

"Squeeze it," Durham said.

Abumwe did so. Its eyes popped out and it offered up a squeaky chuckle. The diplomats laughed.

"Thank you, Otha," Abumwe said. "I don't know what to say."

"On the contrary, I think you know *exactly* what to say," Durham said. "You're just too diplomatic to say it."

• • •

Durham spent an hour at the after-ceremony reception meeting and greeting with Abumwe's team, and in particular making the acquaintance of Hart Schmidt and Harry Wilson, the two members of Abumwe's team who escaped Earth Station as it was literally disintegrating around them.

"I don't imagine that's something you want to relive much," Durham said to Schmidt, after he had been introduced to him and one of his friend's friends, whose name vaporized from Durham's mind almost instantly after the introductions were made.

"Well, I was actually unconscious for the worst of it, sir," Schmidt said, and nodded to Wilson. "Harry is the one who can tell you what it was really like."

"And what was it really like?" Durham asked Wilson, turning to him.

"Completely terrifying," Wilson said, and everyone laughed. "Or it would have been, if I hadn't been actively distracted by trying to stay

alive on a trip through the Earth's atmosphere. Which was also terrifying."

"That's right, you skydived from Earth Station down to the planet."

"Yes, sir."

"Which means you're the one who saved the U.S. secretary of state's daughter."

"Danielle Lowen," Harry said. "I did. She's a diplomat in her own right as well."

"Yes, of course," Durham said. "But the fact that she was the secretary's daughter is one reason why the United States, if no one else on Earth, will still speak to us. So thank you for that."

"Just doing my job," Harry said.

"I hope we gave you a medal for that."

"You did," Harry said. "The CDF gave me one, too. I'm all medaled up."

"Very good," Durham said. "Now let me buy you a drink to go with them."

Wilson smiled. "I knew I liked this posting."

Shortly thereafter Durham excused himself and exited the reception area, to find Renea Tam and his luggage, ported by a State Department employee pushing a cart.

"I don't think you need that many clothes," Tam said, looking at the cart. "You're going on vacation, not moving away."

"My vacation is three weeks long," Durham said. "I want to spend very little of that time doing laundry."

"You're staying at an embassy," Tam said. "They have *staff* there. Who would do your laundry."

"In the future I will set forth with a single change of clothes in a duffel bag," Durham said. "But as my shuttle to the *Chandler* is leaving in forty minutes, this time I'll just have to manage."

Tam grinned at this, and the three of them headed toward the shuttle to the *Chandler*. Durham took his leave of his assistant at the shuttle door and took a seat on it, across from the only other passenger, a young man with dark hair.

"I liked your speech today," the young man said, after the shuttle had departed from Phoenix Station and was making its way to the *Chandler*.

Durham, who had been resting with his eyes closed, cracked them open and glanced at the speaker, looking him over. "You look familiar."

"You were introduced to me earlier today," the young man said. "Don't worry, I don't expect you to remember. I expect you shook a lot of hands today."

"You're in the diplomatic corps?" Durham asked.

"No," the young man said. "But a friend of mine is. Hart Schmidt."

"One of Abumwe's people."

"Yes. He and I went to school together. Well, he was about three years ahead of me. But our dads were friends, so I got to know him. When he found out I was going to be on Phoenix Station on my way to the *Chandler,* he invited me to the ceremony. I was in the back for most of it. I'm Rafe Daquin." He reached over and held out a hand.

Durham took it. "You're crew on the *Chandler,* then," he said.

"Yes," Daquin said. "I'm a pilot."

"That's not a bad job."

"Thank you," Daquin said. "I get to travel and see the universe. I expect you get to do the same as a diplomat."

"Not as much as I used to," Durham said. "I'm a bureaucrat now. The most I get to see of the universe these days is my desk."

"Why are you traveling now?"

"Vacation," Durham said. "I'm going to Huckleberry, to see friends and do some hiking."

"Why travel on the *Chandler,* if you don't mind me asking?" Daquin said. "We're a cargo ship. I'd think you'd just have one of your diplomatic ships take you."

"Borrowing a diplomatic corps ship to taxi me to my vacation spot would be looked on as misappropriation of resources, I think," Durham said, smiling. "And also there were none going my way when I needed it. Anyway the secretary encourages us to support private enterprise." He closed his eyes again, hoping Daquin would pick up the hint.

He didn't. "Do you really think diplomacy is treason?" Daquin asked. "That the Colonial Union sees it that way, I mean."

Durham kept his eyes closed. "I may have been exaggerating for effect," he said. "But it's certainly true that given a choice, the Colonial Union would rather shoot than talk. It's gotten us in trouble."

"You know about the disappearing ships?" Daquin asked.

Durham cracked his eyes open again at this. "Disappearing ships," he said.

"More civilian ships are going missing over the last couple of years," Daquin said. "Cargo ships, mostly. Ships like the *Chandler*."

"There's always been piracy," Durham said. "That's one of the reasons why the Colonial Defense Forces were formed. That and other intelligent species trying to kill us."

"Right, but pirates usually go for cargo," Daquin said. "They don't make ships disappear."

"What do you think it is?" Durham asked. "What are the rumors?"

Daquin shrugged. "If you ask me, it's got to do with us losing the Earth. Other species know we've started rationing our military to deal with major problems, so they're starting to pick off trade ships to weaken the Colonial Union's infrastructure."

"Seems a long way to go about it," Durham said.

"Every little bit counts."

"This doesn't make you afraid?" Durham asked. "You're a pilot on a cargo ship. Presumably you're a target."

Daquin smiled. "I have to eat."

"That's a very practical way of looking at one's potential fears," Durham said.

"That, and I've been through some close scrapes before," Daquin said. "I should have been dead a couple of times already because of ship failures and accidents. I've survived."

"Have you," Durham said. "Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know," Daquin said. "I think I may just be luckier than most people." This time it was Daquin who closed his eyes and put his head back to rest. Durham watched him for a few moments before doing the same.

• • •

Three days out from Phoenix Station and less than one day prior to the skip to Huckleberry, Durham asked for and received a private audience with *Chandler*'s captain, Eliza Perez.

"What is this about?" Perez asked. The two of them were in her stateroom, which, like everything else on the *Chandler,* was cramped. "If you're going to complain about the accommodations, as you can see, you are traveling with the same appointments as the captain."

"The accommodations are fine, of course," Durham said. "Captain Perez, I have something to confess to you. I came onto your ship under false pretenses." He had his PDA in his hand. He activated it and handed it to Perez. "I booked passage on the *Chandler* with the story that I am headed for vacation on Huckleberry. In fact, I am going somewhere else entirely."

Perez took the PDA and looked at what was on the screen. "What is this?" she said.

"It's an official request from the State Department for you to take me to a destination I will give you once you give me back my PDA,"

Durham said. “It’s a secure and official request, which is why I’m showing it to you on my PDA rather than just transferring the document to your own PDA. It’s awkward to do it that way but this way you know the orders aren’t forged.”

“You just said ‘orders,’” Perez said. “That’s substantially different than a request.”

“Officially it’s a request, which you are able to refuse,” Durham said. “Unofficially we both know it’s not in your interest to refuse it.”

“Where would I be taking you?”

“To a system that has nothing at all of interest in it, which makes it a good place to have a secret meeting.”

“A secret meeting with whom?”

“That I can’t tell you.”

“Then I can’t let you borrow my ship.”

“That’s not wise.”

“Sending the *Chandler* to a destination far off our schedule for ‘secret meetings’ isn’t *wise,* either,” Perez said. “You either tell me what you’re asking me to do, or it won’t get done.”

“And if I tell you?”

“Then it still might not get done,” Perez said. “Because I still have to make a decision. But there is a difference between ‘won’t’ and ‘might.’ So you don’t have a choice.”

“I’m meeting with representatives of the Conclave to—informally—discuss an alliance with them.”

“Seriously,” Perez said, after a moment. “An organization of four hundred alien species, most of whom tried to murder us, and you want to make friends with them.”

Durham sighed. “Captain Perez, I don’t think I actually have to tell you that the Colonial Union is in a deep well of shit at the moment,” he said. “The cargo ships that whoever it is are picking off are just the start. Sooner or later someone is going to go after an established colony.

Sooner or later someone is going to go after the Colonial Union itself. We're vulnerable and becoming more so every day. All they'll have to do is wait until we're weak enough to be attacked."

"And we think joining the Conclave is going to fix this."

"Not *joining*," Durham said. "An alliance. A mutual defense against aggression pact."

"This after the Colonial Union tried to destroy the Conclave," Perez said, and noted Durham's expression. "Yes, we all know about that. About the incident at Roanoke. I run a trade ship, Mr. Durham. You can keep news away from the official channels if you like but trade ships have their own lines of communication. We travel. We talk. We know."

"Then you know why the meetings have to be secret for the time being," Durham said. "If this round succeeds then we can do something more public. If it doesn't then it will never have happened. Another reason, incidentally, to have the *Chandler* take me to the meeting, and not one of the State Department's ships."

"There is a small matter of the cargo we're carrying," Perez said. "Gaalfruit and other highly perishable products. We timed our travel to arrive at Huckleberry just before the gaalfruit ripens. If we arrive even a few days late we can't sell it. Insurance won't cover the loss if we can't tell why the cargo didn't arrive in time."

"Obviously the Colonial Union Department of State will purchase your cargo."

"All of it."

"Yes, and before you ask, yes, at fair market value," Durham said.

"It's not just about the cargo," Perez said. "We have relationships with distributors. We are supposed to pick up new cargo as well. Also agricultural products. Also highly perishable. If we're not there when we're supposed to be, they lose out and we damage that relationship."

"State will cover it all."

"That's going to cost a lot of money."

"Yes, well," Durham said, and smiled. "The Colonial Union actually creates the money in question, so I don't think covering your expenses and expectations will be a problem."

Perez was silent for a moment.

"Is there anything else you would like?" Durham asked. "Would you like me to promise to wash and wax the *Chandler* after I am done using it?"

"I don't like this," Perez said.

"I can understand that," Durham said. "I do apologize for presenting it to you this way. I am under orders. You can, at least, understand why secrecy is actually important for this mission."

"Do you think it's going to work?" Perez asked. "The mission, I mean."

"I think if it doesn't, you should probably spend all the money you're going to make off this trip," Durham said. "And spend it as quickly as you can."

• • •

The first thought that came to Rafe Daquin as he bubbled up uneasily into consciousness was, *I can't feel my legs*.

The second thought he had, after another moment, was, *I can't feel my anything*.

Rafe sunk back into unconsciousness after that, falling through a blackness of indeterminate length and depth.

• • •

Rafe was dreaming and knew he was dreaming, because this was one of those dreams where he stood still and everything moved around him.

He started on the bridge of the *Chandler,* beginning his first day as an apprentice pilot, after six months at navigation and a year in the ranks of the engineers before that. The *Chandler's* chief of pilots was

not entirely pleased to find Rafe in her charge. Rafe had been dumped into her lap by Captain Walden, and he knew that Lieutenant Skidmore thought Walden had been bribed by Rafe's family to accelerate him through the ranks. And, well, she had; Rafe's father told him as much the last time the *Chandler* was at Phoenix Station. In Rafe's dream he was experiencing Skidmore's thinned lips and otherwise carefully neutral demeanor for the first time.

Rafe's response in the dream was the same as it was in life: outward careful politeness and attentiveness, inward lack of concern because the fix was already in, and he was going to be a pilot whether Skidmore liked it or not. She hadn't liked it. She left the *Chandler* not too long after. This occasioned Rafe's promotion to assistant pilot, right on schedule, which was to say, ahead of schedule and ahead of others.

A blink-shift and he was in the headmaster's office at Tangipahopa Hall, waiting for either his mother or father to arrive. This time it was for punching one of the sixth-form students in the head; other times it would have been for infiltrating the dining hall at 3 A.M., stealing one of the custodial carts for a joyride, or taking money to change grades for other students (and then not doing it, which prompted one of his unsatisfied customers to complain). Rafe was hoping it would be his father, who graded transgressions on a curve, as opposed to his mother, who emphatically did not. Rafe's eventual graduation from Tangipahopa required his father agreeing to speak at the graduation ceremony, and his mother funding a science lab.

Another blink and it was the day after Rafe's graduation from University of Metairie, with an ordinary degree in engineering, earned less by lack of ability than by overall lack of attendance and interest. His mother was telling him she wouldn't sign off on the release of his trust fund, which customarily was given to the Daquin children on completion of their degree. Rafe pointed this out; his mother noted that "customary" was not the same as "obligatory," and then stood there

daring him to argue the point with her, she who regularly argued cases before the Phoenix High Court.

Rafe did not take the challenge. He instead looked to his father, whose face was carefully blank. He was not stupid enough to argue with Colette Daquin either. Nor could he do anything on his own; by the rules of the Daquin Family Corporation and Trust, both parents, if they were living, had to sign off on any trust disbursements prior to thirty-five years old (standard). Colette Daquin wanted her slacker child to get a job that would fill in the large and obvious blanks in his education, *not* with the family business. Jean-Michel Daquin suggested the Colonial merchant space fleet. An old supper club acquaintance would find an opening on one of his ships.

A final shift and Rafe was not standing anymore. He was running through the corridors of the *Chandler,* slower than he wanted, trying to avoid whoever it was who had taken the ship, and failing as two of the raiders stepped out of the T intersection ahead of him. Rafe skidded on his heels and turned, falling over his legs in the process. He righted himself and prepared to sprint away and was knocked off his feet for good by a shot to the back of the head.

In the dream as in real life Rafe could feel the shot strike his skin, impact against the bone of his skull, and begin to burrow through into his brain. In the dream as in real life Rafe felt the cold shock of certainty that this was the moment he was going to die, and the thought that rocketed through his brain before there was nothing else at all:

Unfair.

• • •

"All right, I give up," Colonel Abel Rigney said, looking into the glass-walled State Department conference room at the two unsmiling men sitting there. "Who are they?"

Colonel Liz Egan pointed, using the index finger on the hand holding her coffee cup. "The humorless one on the left is Alastair

Schmidt," she said. "He's Phoenix's minister of trade and transport. The humorless one on the right is Jean-Michel Daquin. He's the CEO and chairman of Ballard-Daquin, which is one of the largest shipping companies on the planet."

"That's great," Rigney said. "And we're meeting with them, why, precisely?"

"Because Secretary Galeano told me to," Egan said.

"Let me rephrase," Rigney said. "Why am *I* meeting with them?"

"Because they want to talk about merchant ships being pirated and what we're doing about it, and if memory serves, that's something you know about."

"Fine, but why do they care?" Rigney asked. "Phoenix's Minister of Trade and Transport doesn't have any jurisdiction over interplanetary or interstellar trade."

"He has jurisdiction over the spaceports."

"Right, but his interests stop right around the stratosphere. Piracy is a problem, but it's not his problem. There's not enough of it to have an impact on his planet's trade." Rigney pointed to Jean-Michel Daquin. "Is it his ships getting pirated?"

Egan shook her head. "Ballard-Daquin is planetside only."

"I'm back to my original question," Rigney said. "My second original question, I mean. The one about why are we meeting them."

"You didn't let me finish," Egan said, very calmly, which is how Rigney knew he was close to being taken to the woodshed.

"Sorry about that," Rigney said.

Egan nodded and pointed to Daquin. "His son Rafe is a pilot on the *Chandler,* which is a merchant ship that went missing a week ago."

"Missing as in overtaken by pirates and late to its next destination, or *missing* missing?" Rigney asked.

"You tell me," Egan said. "That's actually *your* department, Abel."

Rigney grunted and quickly accessed his BrainPal for the latest on the *Chandler*. "We sent a skip drone out when it was two days late to Erie," he said, reading. "It's the new policy after Earth Station went down."

"And?"

"And nothing," Rigney said. "It wasn't where it should have been pre-skip, and there's no evidence of it being destroyed. We have nothing."

"So it's missing missing," Egan said.

"Looks like."

"And now you know why Daquin is here."

"How do you want to play this?" Rigney said.

"How I wanted to play it before this conversation," Egan said. "I want you to talk to them about what the CDF is doing about piracy. Make it informative, sympathetic, and conversational."

"You might be better with the sympathetic part," Rigney said. "You're the one who ran a media empire back on Earth."

Egan shook her head. "I was CEO," she said. "You don't become CEO by being sympathetic. I had PR people for that."

"So that's my job here?" Rigney asked. "PR flack?"

"Yes, it is," Egan said. "Any problems with that?"

"I guess not," Rigney said. "And you wouldn't care if I did."

"I would care," Egan said. "Later."

"That's comforting," Rigney said.

Egan nodded and motioned toward the two men waiting in the room. "The way I see it is that between the two of us we can answer their questions and convince them we are on top of things, and then shuffle them off as close to happy and satisfied as we can. Which will make my boss happy. Which will make me happy. And then I will owe you a favor. Which should make *you* happy."

"So, a never-ending circle of happiness, is what you're saying."

"I never said 'never-ending,'" Egan said. "There's no point in overpromising. Just a little happiness. Take what you can get, these days. Come on."

Egan and Rigney entered the conference room, introduced themselves to Schmidt and Daquin, and sat down across the table from the two men.

"Minister Schmidt, I have the honor of being acquainted with your son Hart," Egan said.

"Do you, now," Schmidt said. "He hasn't mentioned you, I'm afraid."

"I'm better acquainted with his boss, Ambassador Abumwe."

"Ah," Schmidt said. "Late of the unpleasantness at Earth Station."

"Yes," Egan said. "We were pleased that her entire team, including Hart, survived the attack."

Schmidt nodded.

Your turn, Egan sent to Rigney, through her BrainPal. *Informative. Conversational. Sympathetic.*

"Mr. Daquin," Rigney said. "I want you to know that prior to this meeting I accessed the latest information about the *Chandler*. I know you must be anxious—"

"One hundred sixty-five million metric revenue tonnes," Daquin said, interrupting Rigney.

"Excuse me?" Rigney said, taken off balance by the interruption.

"My company ships one hundred sixty million metric revenue tonnes of cargo through Phoenix Home Port to Phoenix Station, and to the ships that berth here," Daquin said. "That's close to ninety percent of the shipping that runs through Phoenix Home Port to this space station of yours."

"I did not know that," Rigney said, not sure where this was leading but not wanting to ask directly.

"I understand my telling you this fact must appear random," Daquin said. "But I need you to understand that figure because it will offer gravity to what I tell you next."

"All right," Rigney said, and glanced over to Egan, who was not returning his glance.

"You know about the *Chandler,* and my son," Daquin said.

"Yes," Rigney said. "I was just about—"

"You were just about to tell me nothing," Daquin said, interrupting again and silencing Rigney once more. "I'm not a stupid man, Colonel Rigney, nor am I without resources, which include Minister Schmidt here. I'm well aware you currently have no idea what happened to *Chandler* or any of its crew. Please do me the courtesy of not trying to placate me with your vapidity."

"Mr. Daquin," Egan said, interjecting herself into the conversation, which Rigney assumed meant that he was being benched. "Perhaps it's best if you come right out with whatever it is you came here to say."

"What I have to say is simple. I control ninety percent of all the cargo that comes up and through Phoenix Station," Daquin said. "Ninety percent of the food. Ninety percent of essential materials. Ninety percent of everything that makes your space station"—Daquin emphasized these two words—"habitable and the place from which the Colonial Union runs its little empire of planets. If I don't know within a week the certain fate of the *Chandler* and its crew, shipping to Phoenix Station stops."

This was met with silence all around. Then Egan turned to Schmidt. "This is unacceptable."

"I agree," Schmidt said. "And I told Jean-Michel that very thing before we came up here."

"But you still brought him here to make this ultimatum," Egan said.

"I did," Schmidt said. "Which should in itself tell you the lack of options I had, as minister of trade and transport, in dealing with this."

"Perhaps it was not advisable to let one company handle the vast majority of shipping to Phoenix Station," Egan said.

Schmidt smiled thinly at this. "I would agree, Colonel Egan," he said. "But if you're looking to blame the Phoenix government, you're going to need to look at the Colonial Union contracts first. You're the ones who have given Ballard-Daquin control of your shipping, not us."

"We can't guarantee that we will have any information," Rigney said, to Daquin. "We're not being lazy about this, Mr. Daquin. But if a ship or its wreckage"—Rigney regretted the phrasing almost immediately, but there was nothing to be done for it at the moment —"is not found immediately, the task of finding it becomes exponentially more difficult."

"This is your problem," Daquin said.

"Yes, it is," Rigney said. "But if you are going to put us on the hook for this problem, you need to understand its scope. What you are asking may well be impossible in the timeframe you're asking for."

"Mr. Daquin," Egan said. Daquin turned his attention to her. "Allow me to be entirely frank with you."

"All right," Daquin said.

"I sympathize with your concern for the *Chandler* and her crew, and your son," Egan said. Rigney noted wryly that it was Egan, after all, who ended up deploying the *sympathy* card. "But you are mistaken if you think that attempting to hold Phoenix Station's shipping hostage is going to work. For one thing, the shipping we get from Phoenix can be replaced by other colonies. For another, the damage you'll cause Phoenix's export economy will be immense." Egan pointed to Schmidt. "Whether Minister Schmidt here wants to tell this to you or not, he and his government will be quickly obliged to nationalize your company. And no matter what, you'd find yourself in court for violating your contracts with the Colonial Union. It's also entirely possible, because Phoenix Station is the seat of the Colonial Union government, that

your attempt to starve it out of existence will be looked on as treason. I don't think I need to tell you that the Colonial Union is not notably forgiving of that."

Daquin smiled. "Thank you, Colonel Egan," he said. "I know a little of your history. I know you were a CEO on Earth. It's clear we speak the same language. So allow me to offer you the compliment of being equally blunt with you. Your threat of replacing Phoenix shipping with shipping from other colonies is empty. The Colonial Union is *weak,* Colonel Egan. You've lost the Earth and you're not getting it back. You're running out of soldiers and the colonies know that when that happens you're going to start preying on them to fill the Colonial Defense Force ranks. That makes them all nervous, makes them all finally question whether the Colonial Union has come to the end of its usefulness.

"You start ordering shipping from other colonies for Phoenix Station, they're going to want to know why. And when they find out that it's because Phoenix is starving you from below, some of them are going to realize how weak you are right now and decide it's better to break away now than wait until you've bled them all a little more. You know that. I know that. You don't dare show all the other colonies how weak you truly are."

"A pretty speech that conveniently forgets that your company will be nationalized before that can happen," Egan said.

"Schmidt," Daquin said.

"The Phoenix government won't nationalize Ballard-Daquin," he said, to Egan. "Right now we're a coalition government. That coalition is both unpopular and unstable. As bad as Daquin shutting down exports would be, attempting to nationalize the company would be worse. It would fracture the government. The current government would rather be unpopular and in power than unpopular and out of it."

"The issue could be forced," Egan said.

"The Colonial Union could force the issue," Schmidt agreed. "But that is a solution that is worse than the problem, Colonel Egan, Colonel Rigney." He motioned to Daquin with a slight nod of his head. "Right now you just have one citizen of Phoenix irrationally angry with you. If you force the issue, you'll have a billion quite rationally angry with you. And that anger will be certain to spread. Jean-Michel is right: The Colonial Union is weak at the moment. You don't want to advertise the fact."

"You have a week," Daquin said.

"Even if we could accept your demands, a week is not nearly enough time," Rigney said.

"I don't care what you think is nearly enough time," Daquin said.

"It's not about what I *think,*" Rigney said, more testily than he intended. That, at least, seemed to cut Daquin off. "It's about the limitations of travel and communication. We don't live in a science fictional universe, Mr. Daquin. We can't just zap messages instantaneously from one part of space to another. We have to use skip drones and ships that have to travel to where space is flat before they can leave a star system. Even if we were to start an intensive search and investigation *today,* the fact of how travel works means we have almost no chance of getting you information in a week. Hell, we are *already* searching for the *Chandler*. We *still* would be lucky to get you information in a week."

"I'm not moved," Daquin said.

"I understand that," Rigney said. "But this, at least, isn't something that can be negotiated. If you are only giving us a week, you might as well make your power play now, because we *will* fail you. But if this is actually about your son, Mr. Daquin, then you're going to give us the time to do our job. And our job is what you want us to do: find the *Chandler*."

"How much time," Daquin said.

“Four weeks.”

“Two weeks.”

“No, Mr. Daquin,” Rigney said. “Four weeks. You know shipping and you know what you can do with your company. I know our ships and what they can do. I’m not bargaining with you. I’m telling you the time we need to do this. Take it or don’t.”

Daquin looked over to Schmidt and to Egan, and then turned back to Rigney. “Four weeks,” he said, and then stood up and walked out of the room.

“You know this is going to end badly for him,” Egan said to Schmidt after he’d gone.

“If all that happens is that it ends badly for him, I will be profoundly grateful,” Schmidt said, and stood himself. “My problem is that I don’t see any way that it doesn’t end badly for all the rest of us.” He turned to Rigney. “At least you’ve given me a little more time to prepare. I should thank you for that, but I don’t think it’s going to matter.” Schmidt excused himself and left.

“Well, this was a fun little meeting,” Rigney said to Egan, when they were alone.

“You going to be able to find this ship in four weeks?” Egan asked.

“I’m going to try,” Rigney said.

“Don’t try,” Egan said. “Do it. Otherwise in a month we’ll all be eating each other alive.”

“Literally,” Rigney said.

“Having that happen literally would be the worst-case scenario,” Egan said.

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Acknowledgments

It's been my custom in my book acknowledgments to give a shout-out to the people at Tor who have worked on the book in order to bring it to you, my editor, Patrick Nielsen Hayden, first among them. This time, I want to even more directly acknowledge them, because this time I was a particularly troublesome author—I blew deadlines that I should not have and thus made them go into high-speed mode on their end to get the book out on time. Note I said "high-speed" mode and not "panic" mode—they're too good at their jobs to panic.

So: to Patrick, to Miriam Weinberg, to Christina MacDonald (copy editor), Rafal Gibek (production editor), Karl Gold (production manager), Heather Saunders (designer), Nathan Weaver (managing editor), Megan Hein (assistant to the managing editor), Caitlin Buckley (digital managing editor), and Natalie Eilbert (senior QA associate), thank you, thank you, and again, thank you. I'm sorry you had to deal with me being a problem. I will try very hard not to be a problem to you in the future. And if I am, you can punch me (uh, like, on the arm. Not too hard, please). A shout-out to Tor UK and the folks there for their work on this as well, to Steve Feldberg and everyone at Audible, and, heck, to everyone at all of my publishers, everywhere.

Seriously: Thank you, everyone, who worked on this book with me. People like to rant about getting "the middleman" out of book production, and I wonder if they realize just how much the "middlemen"—the folks who do *everything else* but write the words in the book—add to their enjoyment of the work they read. I know, and I am grateful for the work and care.

Additional thanks to John Harris for his continuing and amazing artistic representations of the Old Man's War universe, and to Irene Gallo, Tor's art director, for her care and appreciation of the visual side of these books, and Peter Lutjen for his design. And to Alexis Saarela and Patty Garcia, who handle my publicity.

Many thanks to my literary agents, Ethan Ellenberg and Bibi Lewis, for selling me in this and many other languages. Thanks also to Joel Gotler, my film/TV agent, with whom I always enjoy taking a meeting.

My wife, Kristine, is the first reader of everything I do and is the person I most trust in the world to call me on my crap as a writer. If you enjoy the book, the credit goes to her (if you don't, it's my fault). I give her thanks and as always my everlasting love.

My wife is my first reader, but I am deeply fortunate that she is not the only one. This is the sixth book in the Old Man's War universe; as I write this it's been ten years since *Old Man's War* was first released. The reason we have gotten this far into it is that so many of you, all over the world, started with it and kept reading. When I think about it, I am amazed. There is so much I owe to each of you, personally and professionally. Thank you so much.

—John Scalzi
April 6, 2015

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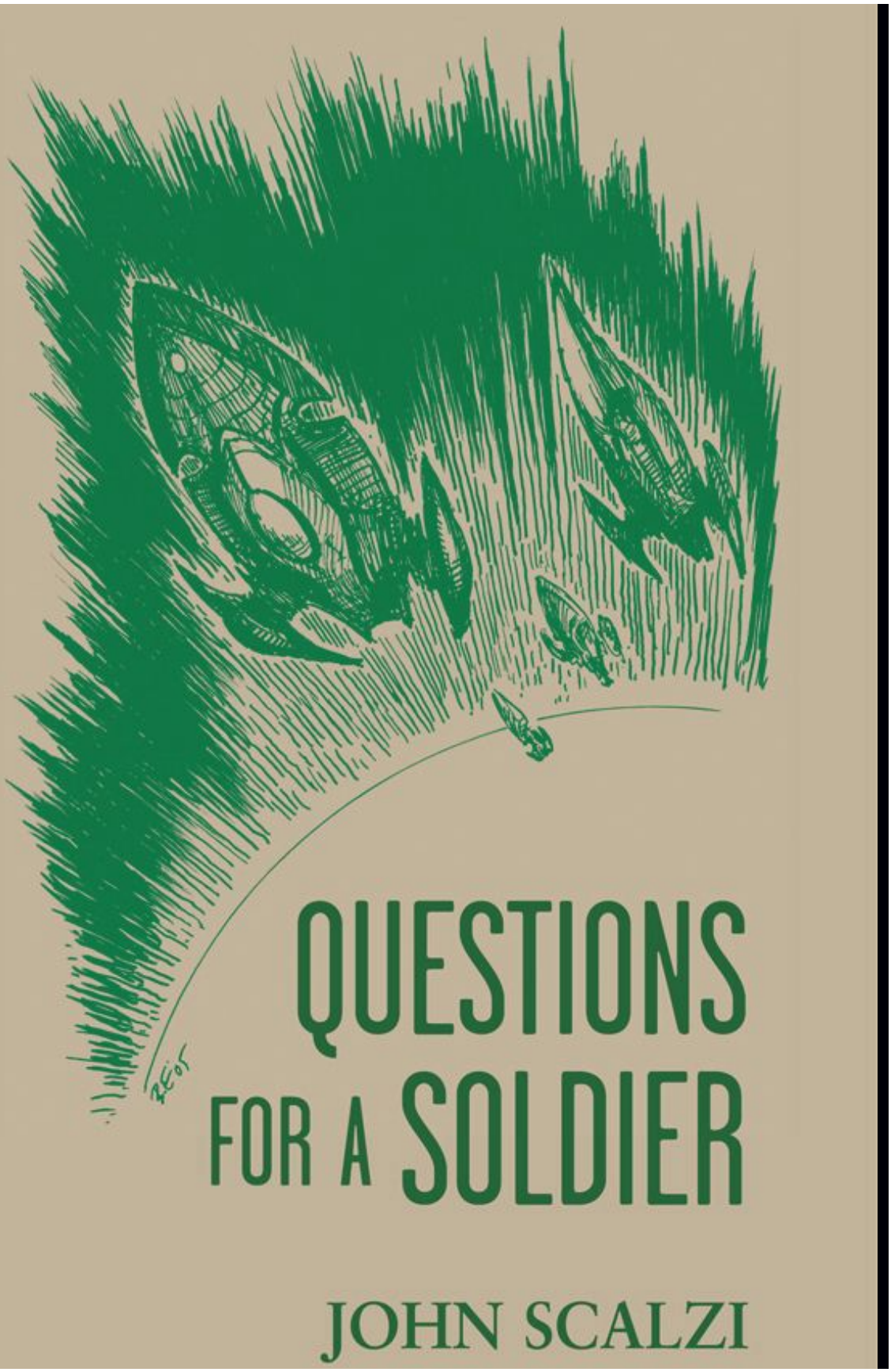
QUESTIONS
FOR A SOLDIER
JOHN SCALZI

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Questions for a Soldier

COLONIAL DEFENSE FORCES
Colonial Outreach Command
CDF Public Relations, 3rd Platoon
Colonel Wm. Schafer, Cmdr

DATE:
238.05.15 SUSN
(see linked table for local equivalents)

FILE NUMBER:
COC/CPR-OOI-3793/16(N)

FILE TITLE: Public Speech, CDF Capt. John Perry, Huckleberry Colony, 238.05.10

FILE DESCRIPTION:
Capt. Perry meets with citizens of village of New Goa on Huckleberry Colony; answers questions about life of CDF servicepersons and other queries.

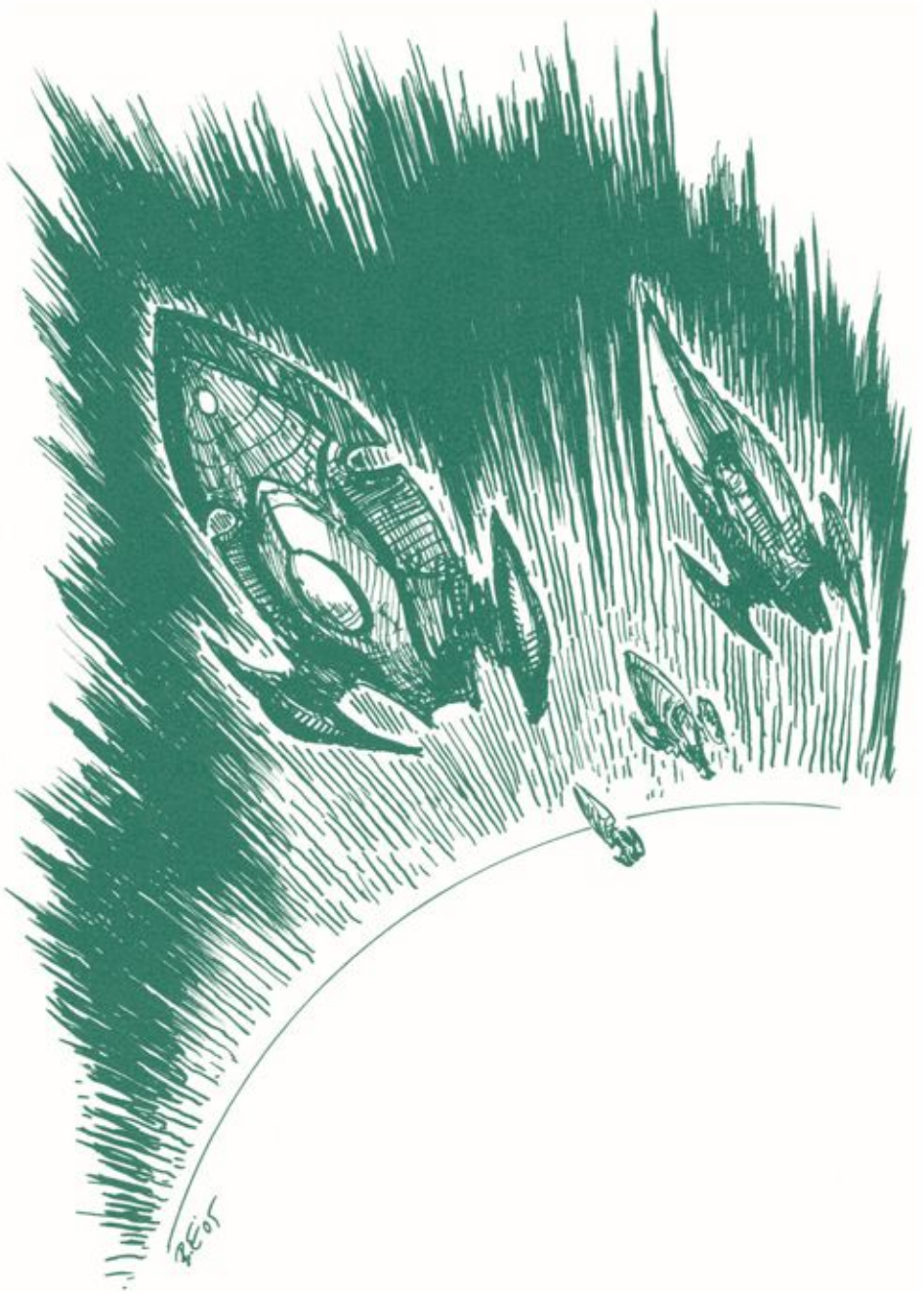
PRINCIPAL SPEAKERS:
Capt. Perry, New Goa administrator Rohit Kulkarni,
seven New Goa villagers

CLASSIFICATION:
Non-classified

REDACTION:
None. Editing for clarity: Standard voice to text algorithms

RECORDED BY:
Capt. John Perry, unedited BrainPal audio feed

FILED BY:
Cpl. John Scalzi, Acting Librarian, CDFPR 3rd Platoon
CC: Col. Wm. Schafer



—TRANSCRIPT BEGINS 238.05.10 03:05:34
(21:30:15 LOCAL)—

ROHIT KULKARNI:
Please, please, everyone. I see Naren Bhatia setting down his dessert, so I truly know that it is time to move on to the next portion of the evening. (laughter) You *have* licked that bowl clean, Naren? (laughter) My Anjali will be pleased to know her contribution to the evening met with such success.

It is not often that our simple village receives a visitor of such esteem as the man I have the honor of presenting to you this evening. As with all of the colonies in the Union, Huckleberry and New Goa remember with horror of the Rraey invasion of Coral, one of the oldest and most precious of our colonies. The Rraey slaughtered all of the colonists there, more than 100,000 lives ended. It was one of the darkest hours in the history of the Union.

But the Rraey did not hold Coral for long, thanks in part to the efforts of our guest, whose courageous actions in battle caused him to be awarded the Silver Star and the Distinguished Service Cross, as well as the first Order of Coral award. He is here tonight to share some of his experiences as part of the Colonial Defense Forces that keep all of the colonies safe, including our own. With great honor, I present to you Captain John Perry.

(applause)

CAPT. PERRY:

Thank you, and thank you, Administrator Kulkarni. It was your wife who made tonight's dessert? No wonder you look so happy. (laughter) The whole dinner was wonderful, really. I don't think I've eaten this well in years.

KULKARNI:
I don't doubt you say that everywhere you go.

PERRY:
Well, I do, but this time I mean it. (laughter) And I've been having a wonderful visit here in New Goa. I have to warn you all that in addition to doing this goodwill tour of the Colonies for the CDF, I also have an ulterior motive: I'm checking out colonies for when I retire. So get a good look at this face; you might have to get used to it one day. (laughter)

KULKARNI:
We would welcome you, Captain.

PERRY:
You say that *now*, Administrator. (laughter) I do have to say that one advantage of settling in New Goa is that although I come from a different culture than you back on Earth, we do share a common language, or at least share *one* common language. Before I came to Huckleberry, I was on Shaw Colony, which was settled by Norwegians. I had to use an interpreter while I was there. I think I accidentally declared war on them at least once. (laughter) There is much less of a chance of that here.

Now, my understanding is that I'm supposed to stand up here and lecture you all on how the Colonial Defense Forces are working to protect you from the rest of the universe, but I have to say that I did that a couple of times and then I got really bored of hearing my own voice. And everywhere I go, people have questions that they want to ask. So if it's all right with you, I'm going to suggest we skip whatever bad speech I would give you and go right to the questions. (pause)

Since I see about two dozen hands, I'm guessing that means it's okay with you. (laughter) Yes, ma'am. You here in the front.

VILLAGER #1:
Are you married? (Uproarious laughter) Not for me! For my niece. She is about your age.

PERRY:
Well, thank you. I'm deeply flattered, although I'm sure your niece would be surprised to find out you're trying to get her hitched.

VILLAGER #1:
Not at all! She's here in the room! Aparna! Stand up! (more laughter)

PERRY:
Hello, Aparna. Please, sit. You're safe from me. (laughter) To answer the question, I'm not married. But it's also against CDF policy for soldiers to be married. We ship all over this part of the universe and it would be very difficult to maintain a marriage. In fact, when we sign up for service back on Earth, we're legally declared dead, which ends any marriage we were in. Some of the people I served with were thankful for that, (laughter) but I don't think it would have made me happy. I was married before I signed up, but my wife passed away before I left. We had been married for over 40 years.

Ah, *that* look. I get that every time I mention something relating to my age. Ladies and gentlemen, I'm 77 years old. So, ma'am, not only am I too old for Aparna, I'm too old for *you*. (laughter) One of the advantages of joining the CDF is that they give you a new body. I'm older than I look. Yes, sir.

VILLAGER #2:
Why are you green?

PERRY:
The food was so good, I ate too much. (laughter) The real answer is that these bodies we're given are engineered to use chlorophyll to give

us an extra energy boost, which we need to help maintain other improvements in this body, like more and denser muscles, faster reflexes and other things. We can also go longer without food than most people, although we don't like it any more than anyone else.

I can see some of you wish that you could have an improved body, but I want to make you aware of the tradeoffs. First, this body is so modified that it can't reproduce. That's definitely not an advantage on a colony. Second, the only way to get a body like this is join the CDF, where you'll have to serve for ten years. In those ten years eight out of ten of the people you joined with will have died in service. I know for myself that of the people I met and became friends with when I joined up, only two are still alive. Look around you in this room and imagine that sort of mortality rate among the people you love and care for. So you have to ask yourself if the new body is really worth it. Yes, sir. Yes, you.

VILLAGER #3:
I am sure you have encountered many alien species. Is there one encounter that is more vivid than others?

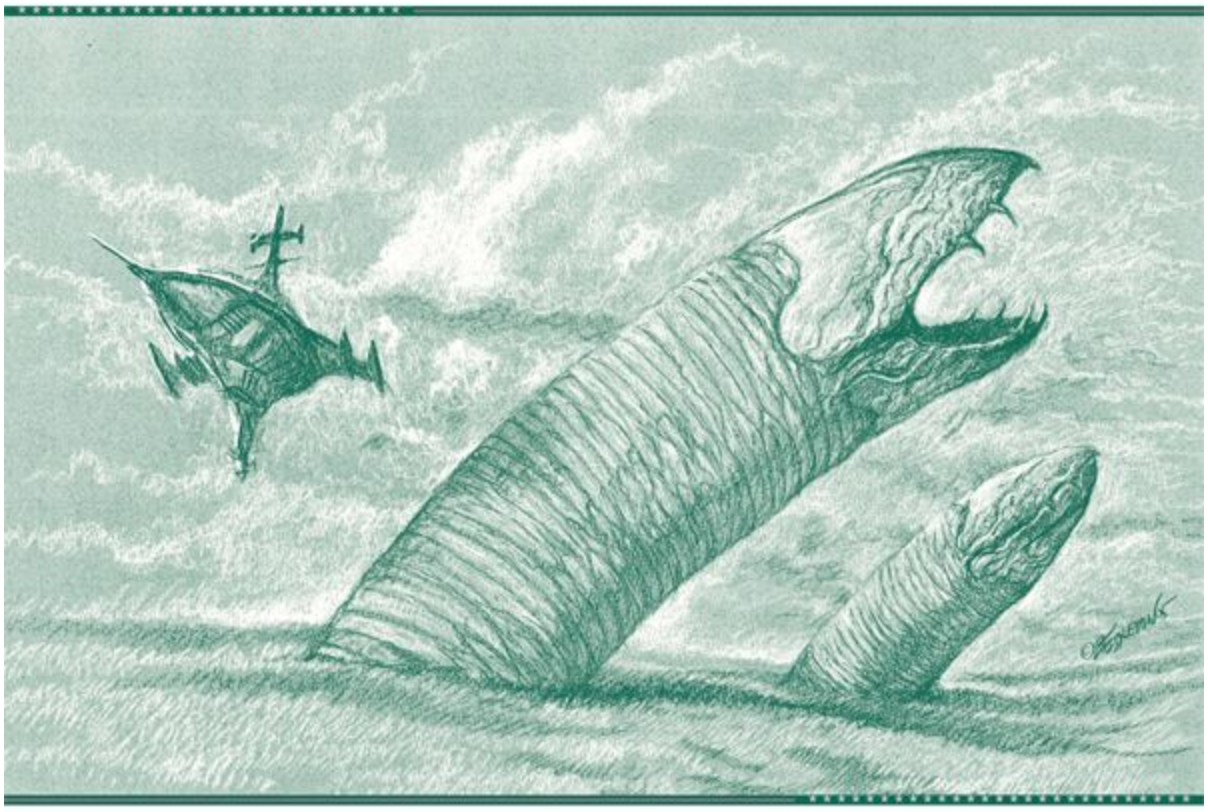
PERRY:
Well, there was the time I was eaten. (audible muttering)

VILLAGER #3:
I believe we would all like to hear about that.

PERRY:
All right. It was about a month before the Battle of Coral, and I and my platoon were sent to an unexplored planet to find a colonial survey team that had disappeared. The first tip-off that something was strange about the planet should have been that it looked gorgeous—perfect for human habitation—but it was completely uninhabited. That's strange because if a planet is perfect for us, it's perfect for a couple hundred other intelligent species, too. And that means it should have been colonized by then. It's like that old joke: A doctor and economist are

walking down the street when the doctor looks down and says "there's a $20 bill on the sidewalk." And the economist says "Impossible! If it were a $20 bill, someone would have picked it up by now!" This planet was a $20 bill on the street if there ever was one. It was impossible that it would be uninhabited. And yet it seemed to be. So they sent out a survey team, and after a couple of days they disappeared.

We landed at the coordinates where the survey team had been, and there was no sign the survey team had ever been there—I mean, nothing: No portable buildings, no vehicle tracks or hover pressure damage, no litter. And no bodies. It was as if they simply hadn't landed. All we saw was a long, rolling plain of what looked like some form of grass. It was very pretty, actually. It was like the universe's biggest front lawn. It was very peaceful, at least until the worms came out of it.



Have any of you ever seen a blue whale? You've seen pictures at least. Imagine something of that size coming up out of the ground right

underneath you. We felt a rumbling before they breached the surface—but not as much as you might expect—and then these huge things were all around us. I remember feeling the ground rumbling and then looking over to see one of my platoonmates fall. As she was trying to stand up, the ground lifted up under her. One of those worms had tunneled under her and had opened its mouth just as it was coming up, so about two or three meters of ground on every side of her was already in the thing's mouth. She was reaching up as the mouth shut on her. I saw her arm and hand dangling out as the worm slid back into the ground, waving like a parody of *Moby Dick*.

I and some of my squadmates started running back for the landing craft when one of the worms surfaced behind us and literally jumped into the air to come down on where we were. My friend Alan Rosenthal was directly in front of me, so I shoved him forward as hard as I could. It worked, because the thing missed Alan. But it got me. It was like a big fleshy wall came down on top of my head, and then I was tumbling ass over head—excuse the language—in this thing's mouth, along with about a ton of dirt. After a minute of this I felt the dirt clearing behind me. The worm was starting to swallow what was in its mouth, dragging me down its throat.

My Empee—that's the rifle we use—was somewhere in the worm's mouth with me, but I didn't keep a grip on it and it was pitch black in there, so it was useless to me. I tried grabbing onto the side of the mouth to keep from sliding back but I had no traction. Finally I took the combat knife from my belt and jammed it into what I guessed was its lower jaw. That kept me from sliding long enough for me to get out my multi-purpose tool. I don't know if any of you know about this; it's a block of nanobots that can take the form of just about any sort of thing you need. It's like the Swiss army knife of the gods. I ordered it into a barbed hook and jammed it in right next to the combat knife just as worm jostled the knife free. The knife slipped out of my hand and down the worm's throat, and I hoped the worm would choke on it. No such luck, though.

I wasn't in danger of being digested at that minute, but it didn't mean I wasn't in trouble. If the worm opened its mouth, there would be a new avalanche of dirt coming in on me, and that could knock me off my hook and down its throat. No matter what, every second I was in the worm was another second I was moving away from my platoonmates. If the worm went deep into the ground, even if I managed to kill it, I would be buried alive. So I had to kill the thing, and kill it fast. I had two grenades on me, so after I got as secure a grip on my hook as I could with my left hand, I activated the grenades and threw them behind me, down the worm's gullet.

They didn't go down as far as I hoped—I was struck in the foot with shrapnel as they detonated—but they did the job, because the worm's mouth immediately started filling with blood, and the thing stopped moving forward and began twitching. After a few minutes of this the worm stopped moving altogether. I waited a few more minutes to make sure it really was dead, and then I endured the worst part of the whole ordeal: I had to actually force myself down the worm's throat to get my Empee. Because you don't leave your rifle behind if you can help it.

KULKARNI:
How did you eventually get out of the creature's mouth?

PERRY:
It involved a lot of digging. (laughter) But my experience explained why this world, which seemed so suitable for intelligent life, was in fact entirely clear of any species we'd met before. Any creatures who landed on its surface were turned into worm food in a matter of hours or even minutes. Those vast plains were the worm's roaming grounds—and not only that, they seemed *designed* that way. Remember the "grass" I told you about? Within an hour of our worm attacks, that "grass" had completely covered where the worms had come out of the ground. Visually, it was like the attack had never happened. We did sonic tests—unmanned tests—and the ground underneath the plains was hardly packed at all, even hundreds of feet down. It was like topsoil. Which made it easy for the worms. It was like they were swimming in the

earth. And these plains covered almost all of the landmass of the planet. Which our scientists said didn't make sense, because the planet was tectonically active. It should have had mountains and rock formations like any other planet.

VILLAGER #3:
Could the worms have changed the entire planet to their liking?

PERRY:
See, that's just it, isn't it? Did the worms make the planet the way it is, or do the worms exist because the planet is the way it is? And if it's the first of these, does that mean the worms did it *intentionally*, and that they're intelligent? You don't have to be an intelligent animal to completely change an ecosystem. Back on Earth, animals like sheep or goats could completely strip an area of vegetation, changing the character of the land. Now, they were managed by humans, which means somewhere along the line there was an intelligence at work. But deer, which were not domesticated, could do the same thing: by eating certain young plants, they'd help create forests with only a few plant species in them.

But even then, we're talking a forest, or part of a grassland. Here, it's an entire planet, and the ecosystem isn't being damaged; it's being *managed*. The more we looked at it, the more it seems like conscious engineering.

KULKARNI:
Perhaps someone should go back and try to talk to them.

PERRY:
Maybe someone should. Just not me. I'd hate to think what would happen if they carried grudges. Yes, ma'am.

VILLAGER #4:
Yes, Captain Perry, how would you respond if I told you that the current political structure of the Colonial Union was one of imperial colonialism and totalitarianism, and that you yourself represented the racist, colonial impulses of that system of control? (audible groans)

PERRY:
Nice to meet you, too.

KULKARNI:
You'll have to excuse Savitri, Captain Perry. Her parents were political exiles to this colony after the Subcontinental War. Rightly or wrongly. But they indoctrinated their daughter well, even though she was born a colonist. She enjoys rabble rousing, although the rabble here isn't often roused. Most of us chose to be here.

VILLAGER #4:
I don't need you to excuse me, Administrator. And I don't need *you* to patronize me, Captain Perry. All we have to do is look at the reality. The colonists, the people who the Colonial Union is built on, are all from poor countries on Earth, most of which are outside the Western sphere of countries. Only Norway regularly sends colonists from Europe, and we all know of that country's ecological disasters. But the Colonial Defense Forces are exclusively taken from rich, affluent countries back on earth, most especially your own United States. Americans practically run the CDF as far as we can tell. And the Colonial Union administration is taken from old-line Colonial stock, which is to say Western countries, before the Colonial Union decided only to take colonists from third-world countries. So: Western administration, American military, poor brown people as colonists and pawns. What about this set-up *doesn't* stink of colonial imperialism?

KULKARNI:
You can ignore her question if you would like, Captain.

VILLAGER #4:

That would be entirely in character for the Colonial Union.

PERRY:
Why would I ignore her? Maybe she's right.

VILLAGER #4:
Excuse me?

PERRY:
Well, aren't you? Colonists *are* from third world countries, or except for those from the earliest colonies, come from populations that were. CDF personnel are from the first world, particularly from the U.S., although not always, since I've served with people from Argentina, the UK and Japan as well as various parts of Europe. And while no one wants to talk about it, from time to time the CDF is made to step in with colonial issues. One of my dear friends lost her life during a labor uprising on Elysium; some petroleum drillers blew her up and then fed her to a fish while she was still alive, so you can imagine the CDF did not tread lightly when it retaliated. Now, as it happens, Elysium is one of the first generation colonies. I think it's mostly Greeks there; the name would fit, anyway. But the larger point stands.

I have to tell you that while I think your point of view makes some sense, those of us in the CDF look at it a little bit differently. Here *we* are, members of the richest countries on Earth—and we're told by the Colonial Union we can't colonize. We're not given a reason, other than that the Colonial Union simply chooses not to recruit colonists from the US or other rich countries. There's no appeal, since the Colonial Union enforces its monopoly on space travel. And so we see the citizens of India, of Pakistan, of Ethiopia, of Guatemala and New Guinea filling up the universe while we're stuck on planet Earth. The only way *we* get to go is if we agree to fight, and we have to wait until we're old men and women before they'll take us. *Then* we have to wait, and survive, for another ten years before we're given permission to colonize. Not many of us make it that long.

So I can understand why you feel that the Western countries are trying to keep the third world in line, even out in the universe. But I can promise you that if most of us had been given the *choice* between colonizing and fighting, we would have gladly chosen colonizing, and equally gladly would have let others have the military responsibilities we've had to take on. Those of us in the CDF are just as much pawns in whatever master plan the Colonial Union has as you are.

VILLAGER #4:
Except that *you* have the guns.

PERRY:
Well, there *is* that. The only thing I can say to that is that at some point in the future, if I live that long, I'll be putting my weapon down and colonizing myself. Then you and I will be in the same boat. I'd rather colonize than fight, personally. But this was how I was allowed to get out in the universe. For better or worse, I agreed to the terms. If I could change the terms, believe me, I would. But it wasn't up to me.

VILLAGER #5:
Why doesn't the CDF let colonists sign up to fight, too?

PERRY:
You know, I wish they did! (laughter) My understanding of it is that very early on in the Colonial Union, the Union decided that it would be better if the colonists were allowed to focus on building the colonies while the CDF chose recruits who weren't tied to one colony or another. I'm sure—and here you see me nodding in the direction of my former questioner here—that there are several levels of Machiavellian *realpolitik* I'm skating over here, and that the true reason for this is more complex than I just gave it. But on the surface this reason makes good sense to me. I've been touring the colonies for the last few months. From what I can see, colonizing seems like incredibly hard work, and in many colonies, especially the newer ones, there hardly seem to be enough people to do the work that's needed. Huckleberry has been colonized for a while now—how long, Administrator?

KULKARNI:
We will be celebrating our fifty-eighth anniversary in another two months.

PERRY:
Right. Okay, Huckleberry's been colonized for almost sixty years, which is time enough for the planetary population to fill out some, both from immigration and natural birth rates. That's enough time for several million people to be here. But some of these new colonies have just a couple thousand people as part of the "seeding" colony; that's the people who work to prepare things for a second wave of colonists. Those people never stop working. Three stops before I was here, I was on Orton, which is only in its first year. I got tired just *watching* them work. They certainly can't afford to ship any of their people off to fight. And to be honest, I don't see why anyone who is already a colonist would want to sign up for the CDF.

VILLAGER #4:
To have control of our own collective destinies, that's why.

PERRY:
She's back! (laughter) That's not a bad reason, but I don't know if the reality of CDF life matches that. Your vision of what it means to be in the CDF—and I mean no disrespect—is romanticized. On a day-to-day basis, you wouldn't be fighting for your colony, other than in the most generalized sense. You'd be fighting to keep some alien creature from killing you or killing one of your squadmates. You'd be fighting not to die, and to stop other people—some you know and some you don't—from dying. Destiny gets compressed, you know, into just that small fraction of a second you have right in front of you at any one time. And there's nothing romantic about keeping your head down to avoid getting shot, or trying to save a friend who's been injured, or coming face to face with a creature who is as smart and mean and as terrified of dying as you are, and who wants to make sure that if someone is left on the ground there, it's you and not it.

I mean, let me say it again, just to make it clear: Eight out of ten CDF members die in ten years of service. Most of those in the first couple of years. It's one thing to say you're willing to die to be in control of your own destiny, whether it's personal or political. But it's another thing to actually *be* dead, light-years away from everyone you ever knew, by the hand or paw or claw or *whatever* of some thing whose motivations for fighting you can hardly begin to understand.

VILLAGER #5:
And yet *you* chose to serve.

PERRY:
I did. Although when I look back on it now, if I had known then what I know now, I might have chosen to stay in Ohio and die in my own bed. I would be lying if I didn't say that when I signed up I had my own romantic notions of what military life would be like. I guess I thought I would be, oh, I don't know, swashbuckling around and fighting Ming the Merciless and kissing green-skinned maidens. Although, come to think of it, I *have* kissed green-skinned maidens. (laughter) So maybe it hasn't been so bad. But to be more serious again, the reality of life in the CDF is far different and far more difficult than I could have imagined.

Knowing what I know now, I *would* do it again, if only because I wouldn't choose not to meet the people I have, and to have missed the opportunity to love them, even if only briefly. But I do wish I had the opportunity to have gone into this with open eyes. Maybe the CDF wouldn't get as many recruits if they knew what they were getting into, but the ones they would get might be better prepared. And I suppose to come back around to Miss Savitri again, that would be an advantage to having colonials in the CDF. They would know what they're getting into. Yes, sir.

VILLAGER #6:
You were saying earlier that this body you have is improved beyond the normal human limits.

PERRY:
That's right. Improved senses, improved reflexes, improved physical agility. I even smell better. (laughter) You laugh, people, but it's true.

VILLAGER #6:
I am curious, how strong are you?

PERRY:
I've never really tested it.

VILLAGER #6:
Could you break that table behind you? With your hands?

PERRY:
I probably *could*. But I *won't*. Because that would *hurt*. (laughter) They've made me stronger, not impervious to pain.

VILLAGER #6:
Still, it must be nice to be that strong.

PERRY:
It's useful, is what it is. I don't notice being stronger or enhanced all that much, to tell you the truth. Most of the people I spend time with are enhanced just as much as I am, so I have no competitive advantage. I lose a lot at arm wrestling. (laughter) The other thing is that the reason we have these physical improvements is that they put us on an equal footing with the aliens we have to go up against. I remember my drill instructor telling us that these new bodies were the bare minimum we'd need to fight, which if you think about it is kind of a terrifying thought. All those alien species out there, each of them with native abilities that are better than our own. Some are faster, some are stronger, some are smarter. Some just plain have more limbs, which is really a problem in hand-to-hand combat. We're just keeping up. The one real advantage that humans have is that on a pound-for-pound basis, we're *meaner*. (laughter) Now, I said that to get a laugh, so I'm glad I got one. But when it gets right down to it, it's also usually true. I

imagine it's kept our species alive more than once. Should I be wrapping things up now?

KULKARNI:
I think we have time for one last question. And if I may be so bold, I see that my Anjali has come into the room, and has a question.

PERRY:
So you're the woman who made dessert.

VILLAGER #7:
I am.

PERRY:
I *love* you. (very loud laughter) And I want the recipe before I go. *And* I will be happy to answer your question.

VILLAGER #7:
Thank you. I came in late, but I have heard enough of what you've said that I can sense the depth of the violence you confront out there on other worlds. It seems to be a dangerous universe out there.

PERRY:
Yes.

VILLAGER #7:
My question is simple: Can we ever find peace in this universe?

PERRY:
(pause) I'll share with you a story. About four months before the Battle of Coral, my ship, the *Modesto*, was part of an attack group bearing down on a colony held by the Ni-ni, who if you don't know are a reptilian sort of race, about a yard tall, and venomous—not in their personalities, mind you, but in that they genuinely spit poison. It makes them very difficult to fight one on one.

The colony was Ni-nin, but there had been a human colony on it a decade or so before. The seed colonists had arrived just before a huge volcanic event that killed off the summer and made the winter unimaginably brutal; the colonists that survived abandoned the planet, and no one could have blamed them. So there were no humans when the Ni-nans arrived and set up shop. But it didn't matter. The Colonial Union had it on the ledgers as our planet, and if it was ours, then anyone else on it was a problem.

And so there we were, the *Modesto* and about twenty other ships, with a total of about 20,000 CDF soldiers, which would have been more than enough to wipe out the Ni-nin colony about nine times in a row. We were in the process of suiting up for the attack when a Skip drone popped into our space and broadcast a general cancellation of the invasion. Apparently—in a shocking moment of clarity for both sides—the Ni-nins and the humans realized that they could actually *share* the planet. The Ni-nin colony was situated on the edge of an equatorial desert, which was blindingly hot for humans but suited the Ni-nins just fine, while the Union was planning a new seed colony in a temperate zone on an entirely different continent. So the Ni-nins and the Union decided to call off the war. It was just that simple.

The attack group all went home except for the *Modesto*, which was told to make a courtesy call on the colony. So I and my platoon spent the next three days in the company of the people who earlier we were going to kill. And you know what? We had a great time. The Ni-nins are ugly as hell—they look like exploded lizards—but their body chemistry is close enough to ours that we can eat their food. And these people are *great* cooks. Just dynamite. We stuffed ourselves silly and held spitting contests, which they are *very* serious about, by the way, and generally acted like civilized sentient beings.

And I remember sitting on a sand ridge with a couple of Ni-nans on the last day we were there, watching the sunset with the two of them, and thinking about just how easy it was *not* to fight every damn creature we came across. Then, of course, we packed up, headed out and found

ourselves at a place called Cova Banda, trying to wipe an entirely different species who had a planet the Union decided was actually ours, but this time, no one wanted to share.

Can there be peace? Sure there can. We made peace with the Ni-ni, and it was a simple thing to do, and now we happily share a planet. But *will* there be peace? Well, that's the question, I think. Making peace is often a simple thing, but simple isn't the same thing as easy. I knew someone who said he believed the Union sometimes thought it was just easier to make war than to bother with peace. I didn't much like this person, but from time to time I see some truth in what he said.

And it's not just the Union—it's all the races all over this part of the universe, all of them deciding to do the easy thing rather than the simple but difficult thing. Maybe what it will take is a great meeting of all the species, where they decide to share worlds instead of fighting each other for them. But God knows it's hard enough even trying to get *humans* to agree on something. Getting all the species together would take a miracle, and about twenty years.

Still, we can hope. We can certainly hope. And that's what I'd ask you to do: Hope for peace. Because I know that I would love to be able to lay down my weapon and get to being a colonist. Just like you are. Just like I want to be.

Thank you, thanks for your attention, and good night.

(applause)

—END TRANSCRIPT—

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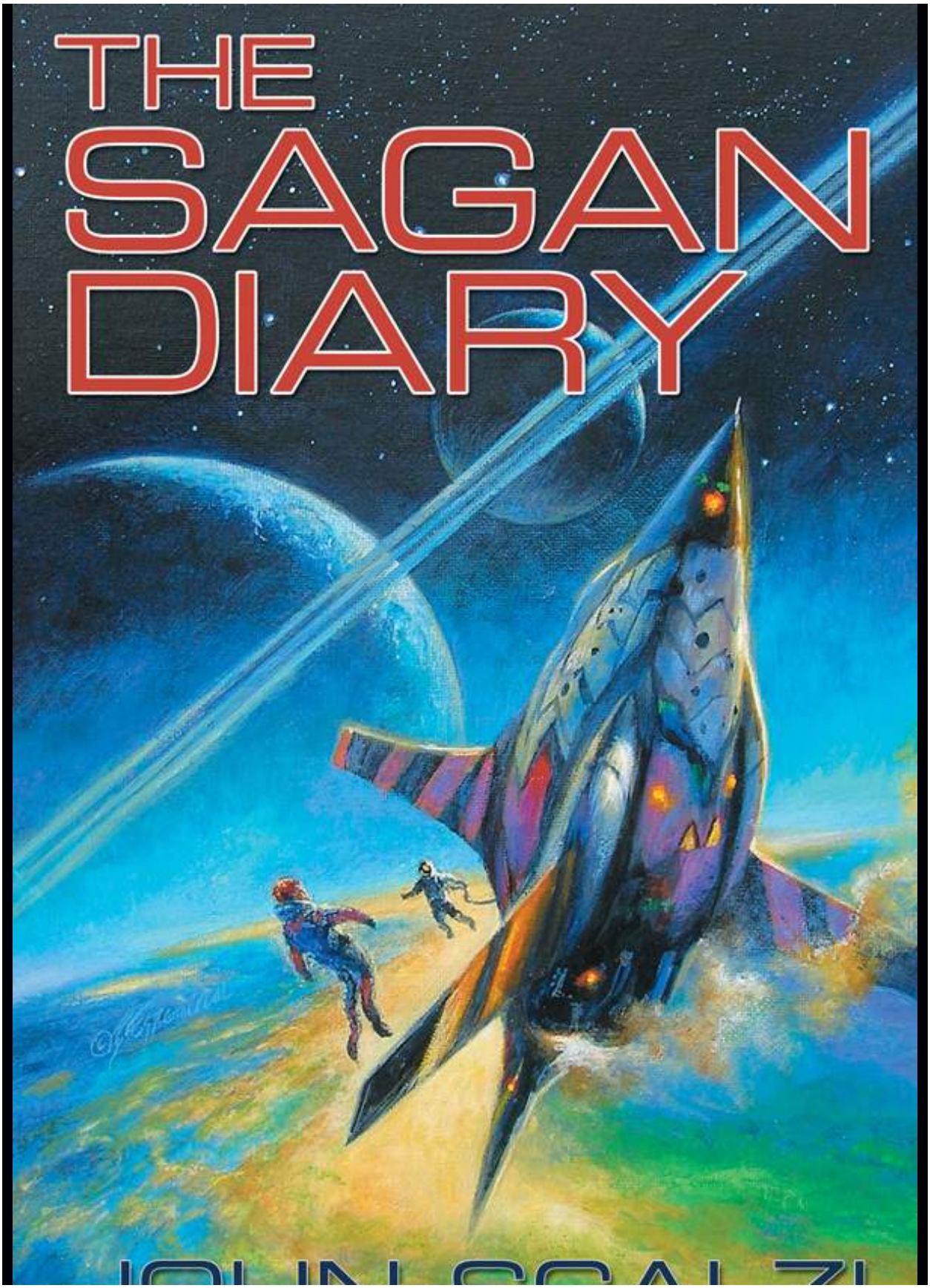
THE
SAGAN
DIARY

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The Sagan Diary

John Scalzi

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For Kristine

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COLONIAL DEFENSE FORCES
Internal Security Command
CDF Information Retrieval and Interpretation, 1st Platoon
Col. Michael Blauser, Cmdr

DATE:
241.12.12 SUSN
(see linked table for local equivalents)

FILE NUMBER:
ISC/IRI-003-4530/6(C)

FILE TITLE:
BrainPal Diary, CSF Lt. Jane Sagan (VI)
Phoenix Station, 241.12.07

FILE DESCRIPTION:
See attached note

AUTHOR:
CSF Lt. Jane Sagan (VI)

CLASSIFICATION:
Classified. Security Clearance Level 2 required.

REDACTION:
Lake-Williams algorithm for emotional feed processing.
Emotional feed available as separate file ISC/IRI-003-4530/6(c)(a)

RECORDED BY:
CSF Lt. Jane Sagan (VI)

FILED BY
Lt. Gretchen Schafer, Chief Analyst (SubSpec: Psych), CDF/IRI
CC: Col. Michael Blauser

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Preface Note to ISC/IRI-003-4530/6(C),
"The Sagan Diary"

Col. Blauser:

As per your instruction in your memorandum of 341.10.07, we have begun processing the BrainPal memory stacks of Colonial Special Forces members who have left that service, whether by death or (rather more rarely) by discharge from service. In both cases BrainPal retrieval was initially via method previously established in our CDF BrainPal retrieval protocol, but per the new directive of 341.10.09 we abandoned physical retrieval of CSF BrainPals and instead began processing BrainPal memory transcriptions as provided by the Special Forces' own IRI office.

Let me reiterate again here in this memorandum what I have expressed to you verbally, which is that processing CSF-provided transcriptions is a massively unsatisfactory solution. The first seven CSF memory stacks we processed were rich in information that we then placed into our analysis matrix, and which were beginning to yield intriguing results before we were ordered to remove the data from the matrix and delete all analyses featuring the data. Data from the CSF-provided transcriptions have been notably inferior, and while our own forensic scans can show no overt signs that the CSF is tampering with the data, it is my professional opinion that the transcription data have been redacted in some way. I have requested funds and clearance for a more thorough forensic scanning. That request has been in your queue for several days now; I would greatly appreciate a response to it in one way or another.

To give you a sample of the sort of "data" that we are limited to processing at the moment, I am submitting this file, which we have informally been calling "The Sagan Diary." It is a transcription of a series of personal files from the BrainPal of former CSF Lieutenant

Jane Sagan, who was discharged from service last week and (somewhat unusually) chose to settle on the established colony world of Huckleberry rather than on Monroe, the colony world set aside for retired Special Forces.

These diary pieces are taken from the last several days before Sagan transferred her consciousness from her Special Forces body to a standard human-template body. I don't need to tell you that for IRI purposes, late-term BrainPal files are typically a gold mine of data, as service members reminisce on their time in service, in doing so refreshing critical data for analysis. Lt. Sagan in particular should be a potentially rich trove of data, as she was present at or participated in several key battles/engagements in the last few years, notably the 2nd Battle of Coral and the Anarkiq offensive; she being Special Forces, she undoubtedly participated in actions which are classified but which, (I would remind those in the Special Forces) we here at IRI are rated to know and view.

Instead, what we have to work with are data-poor bits in which Lt. Sagan thinks about what appears to be a romantic partner of some sort (Cursory investigation suggests a CDF Major, John Perry, who also mustered out of service on the same day and who was on the same shuttle to Huckleberry as Lt. Sagan, accompanied by an unrelated minor, Zoë Boutin. A number of data files for Perry and Boutin are marked classified, which is why I note the investigation was "cursory."). The diary files are of some anthropological interest, to be sure. It's nice to know Lt. Sagan is in love; Major Perry seems like a lucky fellow. However, for *our* purposes these files are near useless. The only data of analytical note are Sagan's notation of The Third Battle of Provence and the Special Forces retrieval of the *Baton Rouge's* ill-fated Company D, about which of course we have a wealth of information, thanks to all the BrainPals that encounter sent our way, and a discussion of her relationship with prisoner of war named Cainen Suen Su, whose stay with and work for the CDF is classified but otherwise well-documented. Beyond this, the data are thin on the ground.

If I may be frank, Colonel, if the Special Forces are not going to allow us unimpeded access to the BrainPals of its fallen and retired

soldiers, then I must question the utility of our processing the data from those BrainPals at all. We process thousands of BrainPals in a month, from regular CDF, and we barely have the staff to keep up with that; spinning our wheels processing bogus data from the Special Forces takes up time and processing power we don't have from data which can be of actual use to us. Either we're all working together here or we're not.

Colonel, please read these "diaries" carefully; I'm sure you will come to the same conclusion we have down here in the processing labs. These diaries may be a window into Lt. Sagan's soul, but what we really need is a window into Lt. Sagan's history. I hope the rest of her life turns out the way she wants. Here in the labs, we need more data.

Sincerely,

Lt. Gretchen Schafer, Chief Analyst
(SubSpec: Psych), CDF/IRI

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Words

Words fail me.
There is a disconnect between my mind and my words, between what I think and what I say; not a disconnect in intent but in execution, between the flower of thought and the fruit of the mouth, between the initiation and the completion. I say what I mean but I do not say all that I mean.

I am not speaking to you now. These words do not pass my lips or pass out of my mind. I say them only to myself, forming them perfect and whole and interior, and leaving them on the shelf and closing the door behind me. Others may find these words in time but for now they face only toward me, whispering back my image with full description, golems who write the words of life on my forehead.

These words are my life. Representation of time and counterfeit of emotion, record of loss and celebration of gain. They are not my whole life; words fail me here as they fail anyone, entire worlds slipping through the spaces between words and letters as a life among stars is compressed into this small space. A short life to be sure; and yet long enough to be lost in translation.

But it is enough. Give us a few lines arranged just so and we see a face and more than a face. We see the life behind it; the terrors and ambivalence, the desire and aspiration—intention in a pattern, a person

in a coincident assemblage of curves. This is that: A few lines to follow that in themselves mean little but build on themselves; a crystal lattice using absence to suggest presence, the implication of more pregnant in the gaps.

I wish I could show these words to you, you who know me only from outward expression. I wish I could fold these words, package them and present them with a flourish, a rare gift I made of myself to you. But these words do not bend—or rather they will not—or perhaps it is that I cannot find the strength to push them through the doors of my mouth and my mind. They are stubborn words and I fear what would happen if I let them go. They stay inside where you cannot come; they are meant for you, but not sent to you. Words fail me and I return the failure.

But these words exist. These words record, these words stand witness; these words speak, if only to an audience of one. These words are real and they are me, or who I believe I have been; incomplete but truthful, through a mirror darkly but reflecting all the same. I have no doubt that one day you will find these words and that you will find me inside them: a seed to plant in your mind, to become a vine to filigree your memory of who I was and who I was to you. Words fail me but I will use them anyway. And in their failure and despite their failure I will live again and you will love me again, as you love me now.

You do not remember your birth but I remember mine. I remember the sudden shock of consciousness, awareness flinging itself at me and demanding to be embraced, and me not knowing enough to do anything other than embrace it back. I sometimes wonder if I had a choice, or if I could have known then what I know now, if I would have received its embrace or would have punched it in the throat, and sent it staggering away to pester someone else, to leave me alone in a newborn senescence from which I would not awake. But in this we are all alike, those who remember our birth and those who do not: None of us asked to be born.

I awoke in perfect awareness and to a voice in my head which spoke "You are Jane Sagan," and with those words the electric pricking of

context, describing the relationship of "you," and of "are" and of "Jane" and of "Sagan"—putting together the words like pieces of spontaneously generated puzzle, and then clicking them into place so the puzzle made sense, even if we later discovered how much we really hated puzzles.

But the words were a lie. I wasn't Jane Sagan at all; I was a changeling, a creature stolen to take the place of someone else. Someone I did not know nor would ever know, someone whose entire life had been set aside for the mere utility of her genes, everything she ever was reduced to a long chemical strand—adenine, thymine, cytosine and guanine—the abrupt tattoo of these four notes replacing a symphony of experience. She was dead but she would not be allowed to rest, because I was needed here.

I wonder if she was in this body before me, if before my consciousness was dropped in this head she waited sleeping, dreaming of her life before and dreaming of her life to come. I wonder if she's dreaming still, housed in the interstices and the places in my mind I do not go. If she is here I wonder if she resents me for taking her place, or whether she is glad of the company, and enjoys the world through my eyes. I cannot tell.

But I dream of her. I dream she and I stand at her grave, standing apart with the headstone between us, close enough to touch although we never do. And she says "Talk to me" and I do, trying to explain a warrior's life to a woman who never fought, ashamed that I have

nothing to share with her but death, which she already knows more about than I.

But she smiles and I know that she doesn't begrudge me that. I ask her to tell me about her and she does and speaks of home and children and of a life of connection, things I have not possessed in my own life but which she is happy to share. I wake up and her words dissipate, specifics evaporating and leaving behind a memory of comfort.

I dreamt of her before we met but I will not tell you that.

The name "Jane Sagan." The name itself mere words: The first name bland and common, the second name for a scientist who hoped for a better universe than the one we live in. I wonder if he were alive what he would think of the woman who used it now, and the cosmos in which she finds herself; whether he could embrace one or both, see beauty in either, or only entropy and slight regard; a rebuke on his lips for this demon-haunted world.

If he demanded his name back it would not matter. The name was random first and last, provided from a list designed to make sure only one Special Forces soldier owned a name at a time. There would not be another Jane Sagan until I bled my life away in battle, the name floating up off my corpse like the spirit of a Buddhist, to be reincarnated on the Wheel of Suffering: returning but learning nothing, repeating the same lessons again and once more, its owners torn from life on different worlds but performing the same actions.

My name is random but I earned it in time. I became Jane Sagan not through the whim of convention but through breathing and moving and fighting and discovering love—each of these coring through the undifferentiated mass of my existence, paring away that which was not me, shedding what was not essential and sometimes what was, demanding I retrieve what I lost or accept its loss; the diminution of a self only recently defined and still defining itself.

I lost some of what I should have been and could have been for you. The parts of me that I lent others who then left me unwillingly or willingly, as they earned the names they had, even as those names lifted

up from them, their purpose spent—those which they signified already fading against the violence of bone and metal.

They took part of me with them. I kept part of them with me, to become me in the fullness of time, some of who I could have been replaced by all that was left of them. If you looked you could have seen them in me: discrete objects breaking down, atoms that would not willingly cohere to the molecule, a colloidal suspension of memory and more than memory; part of me and held within me, bound by names they no longer claimed but becoming me, to be called by my name, "Jane Sagan."

In the end I am who I am. I am what I have made myself and what has been made of me. Part of who I am is who you are too; I have given you me as well. I would take your name and hold it in me, and whisper my name in your ear.

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Killing

I am not Death. I am killing; I am the verb, I am the action, I am the performance. I am the movement that cuts the spine; I am the mass which pulps the brain. I am the headsnap ejecting consciousness into the air.

I am not Death but she follows close behind, the noun, the pronouncement, the dénouement and the end. She looks for where I have gone next, and where she is needed, and sometimes where she is wanted; desired as the worlds for those whom I have visited narrow down to a point too heavy to be long borne.

I have wondered whether death collapses the point into nothingness or expands it into eternity, but I do not wonder long. Death follows me but I do not look back to her and I do not dwell on what she does. I am killing, I am the action, and I have a job to do.

I am connected to those I kill: a T-shaped joint where their lives intersect mine, the line of their lives terminating in the contact while mine continues on to the next orthogonal encounter, toward the promise and threat of becoming the terminating arm—of the moment when death no longer follows but stands pitilessly before me, expanding or contracting everything I ever was or will be for her own unknowable aims.

I am connected to those I kill and I long to know them. I long to look down their line to see what has led them to me; whether they chose this moment or had it chosen. If they had chosen it, whether it was love or honor or duty or something else that set their line toward mine; if they had it chosen why they chose to accept it, and whether they would have accepted the choice if they knew I was waiting for them, preparing their final moment, every possible future imploding toward the point of my knife, the grain of my bullet, the grip of my hand.

I am connected to those I kill and would look past them, down the line of their lives to the originating point, to the other T-joint where their lives intersect with another: to the creature who bore them—to the woman, the female, the she; the verb and action and performance to complement my own, she who is not birth but whose acts allowed it, as I am not death but whose acts permit it.

When she first held this child who would become what I would kill, did she look for me as I look for her? Did she see me across the line of a life yet unlived? I want to know how I would appear to her: the anti-mother to kill whom she had created, or perhaps a crossbeam with her, to support the entirety of a life, without whom that life would be useless.

I do not flatter myself to suggest she would approve of what I represent, of what I would do, will do, have done, to the life she created and cherished. But I wonder if she would understand I am connected to her, through the one she bore. I stand facing her, staring across the chasm of time forded by this life between us.

The first thing I killed was unspeakable. Its species had a name for itself spoken like a hammer thumping onto meat; we could not have spoken it if we had tried.

We did not try. We called them for their language, for the percussive explosions which passed for their speech and filled the air when we fought them, like the beating of heavy skins. They were talking drums with weapons.

They were Thumpers and they were our enemy, our nemesis for the crime of landing on a world we said we owned and begging to differ with us on the matter. We sent emissaries to negotiate with them: 16th Brigade, Company D on the ship *Baton Rouge*. The negotiations did not go well. The *Baton Rouge* was made to fall into the atmosphere in a sparkling show, as metal and men tore into the sky and the sky tore back, shearing them down in layers that grew into conical sections of ash expanding behind their shrinking mass, ignored by the members of Company D on the skin of the world, who could not look up from their battle to see their friends' farewell.

We felt Company D deserved its fate, the negotiations a lie and stupidly done at that; ham-handed arrogance that had gotten them stuck, and pleading for our help. We called them the "The Idiots"; we would have left them to die—an object lesson in incompetence—but we were not allowed a vote. We found ourselves on a world we should not have been on, to retrieve those who should not have needed retrieval, to kill those whose lives we should have not been made to take.

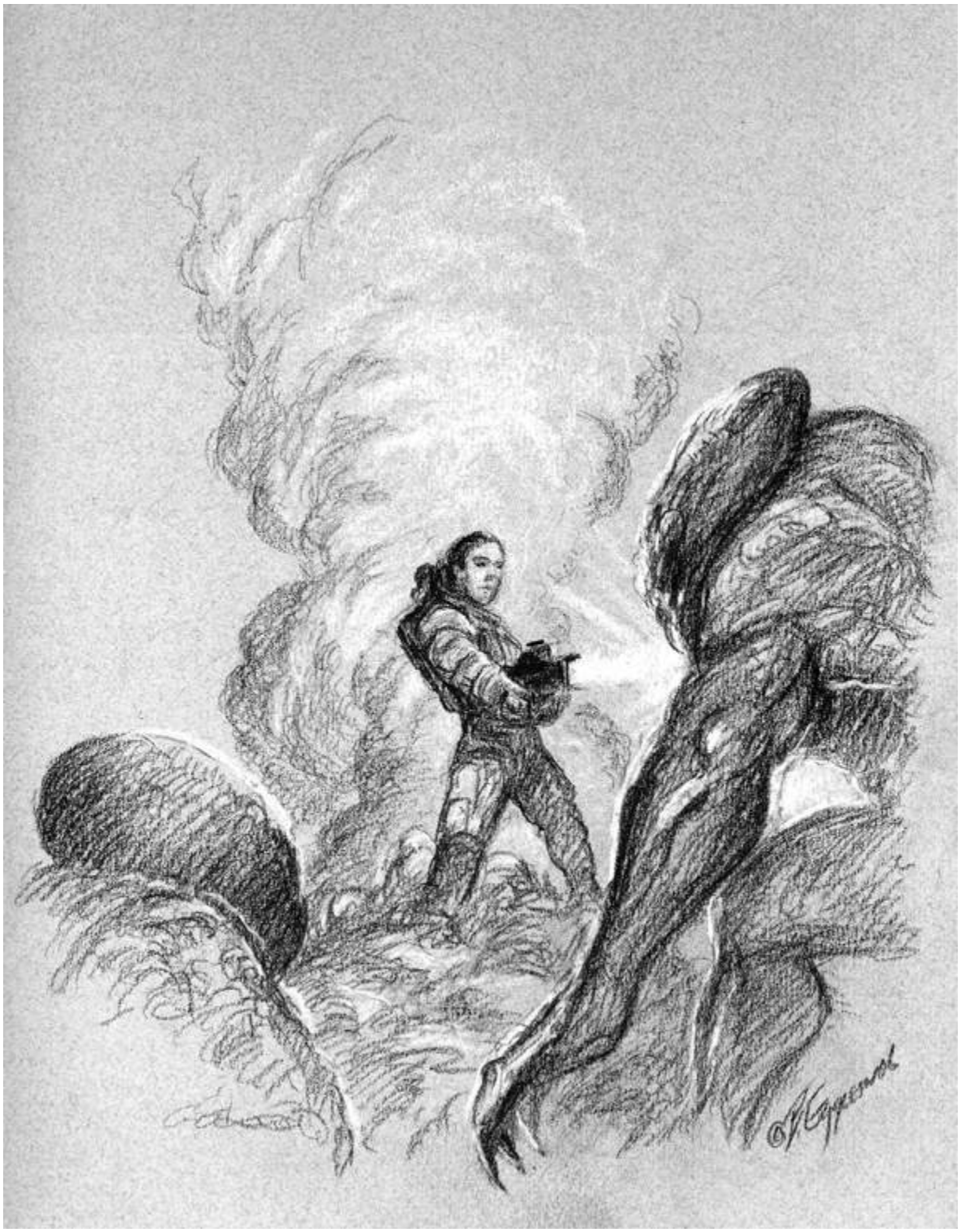
We would not complain about it. This was what we were bred to do. But it did not change the fact; my first mission was fighting someone else's battle, making it my own by necessity. There was not much of Company D to retrieve; just enough for someone above us to declare victory despite the dead we left behind.

I will not detail the battle. I am here and that is enough.

The first thing I killed danced when I killed it, the force of the bullet spreading across its surface even as the slug traveled through its mass. It danced and spun and twisted and fell, shedding blood in a spiraling helix, angular momentum and gravity bartering for its movement and gravity getting the better end of the deal. It fell and lay sodden and I moved on to the next, already the verb and the action, already movement and purpose. My body moved.

My mind stayed, and in quiet moments in the days that followed returned to the dance, to the spin and slide and the sound of mortality the thing thumped out as it fell. I returned to that sound and imagined what it said: a shout of pain, a brief tattoo of regrets, the name of a lover or a brother or perhaps a mother; a final call backward, a farewell

to the one who had given it life or those who filled the life with joy, not to be seen again in the time that remained.



I have the moment recorded. If I chose I could open that moment again, find a translation and know for certain. I choose not to know. I had killed this thing. It deserved to have its final words fly past me, to find those for whom they were meant.

I think on what I owe those I kill. Clearly I do not owe them their lives, nor do I owe them individual memory; I have killed far too many to mark each with remembrance. My time with nearly all is too short to note much other than that they are dead and I am alive, even if it was a near thing on both counts.

I do not owe them guilt or regret. I have done what I have done. I know what I have done well and what I have done poorly, and for whatever I might be judged, I know no one knows better than I for what things I should be called into account. I know my own measure and will not burden those whom I have killed. If they have souls let them go to where they are bound, without my pleas of forgiveness to chain them to me, and to this world.

What I owe those I kill is understanding. I owe them the courtesy of recognition; acknowledgement that they were something other than just another thing I had to kill on the way to other things I had to kill. I cannot know every creature I have killed; I cannot spare the memory for each of them entire. But I will not pretend they were not my equal. Their lives were their own, and in their way they loved and feared and wondered and hoped. They did not expect me to be the end of all of that.

I will not pretend that all there was to them was the flesh I wounded, the bones I shattered, the blood I made to spill. I will not pretend that it does not matter to them that their lives are at an end. I grieve the loss of those I love and I will not pretend that those I kill are not missed, were not loved, are not grieved.

Some would not choose to do this and I do not fault them. Each of us does what we can to accept ourselves and what we do. But to see those I kill as less than myself lessens myself. I do not have enough of myself to lose that way.

After my first mission I learned of the Thumpers: their culture and ways and world. I learned of their gods and demons, their myths and fables and stories, learned of their art and song and the dances they danced without a bullet to guide them. I became an expert on the creatures I had killed, and when I did the one I made to dance and die took its leave of me.

I learned of the next people I would kill before I killed them, as I have done every time since. It became my job, along with killing, to learn what I could about those we fought and killed, the better to fight them, and the better to kill them—my need to know and understand and recognize those whose lives I end turned to practical use.

It is good to be useful for more than just killing. It is better to know that in my way I honor those I kill, as I would hope they would honor me.

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Speaking

Let me speak your name. Let me feel the movement of my tongue within my mouth, of lips stretched and jaw pushed slightly forward, of the breath from my lungs shaped and formed into noise and phonemes and syllables and words; into proper nouns signifying you. Two names with marvelous utility: to recall you from memory, to bid for your attention, to speak your identity into the air and in doing so affirm you in your tangible skin, with vibration and waves and exhalation, with the intimacy of sound spoken aloud; with the pleasure that comes from the physical act of declaring you.

Let me speak your name and in speaking let me sing, a secret melody whose notes rise like birds and fall into your ears, to turn you toward me, with a smile that anticipates your own hidden song that choruses with my name. Let me speak your name so I may hear my name spoken to me from you.

You cannot imagine the sensuousness of speech, you who have spoken all your life, you who have mouthed words like bread, a staff of life common on your tongue. You cannot appreciate the luxury speech represents to those of us who have no time for it, we who speed our words, transmitting mind to mind without mediation, not even the briefest pause between mind and mouth to temper what we say or to soften sharp edges.

To speak without words is to speak fast and cheap, to not have to choose words either wisely or poorly but to send them all without discrimination—all content and no style, function over form, everything being what is said and nothing being how it is said. I talk to those I know, one mind to another, efficient and sure. We say what we need to say and then move on. Words do not mean to us what they mean to you and yours. We have other ways to share our emotions and our care and regard. Words do not carry that freight for us; they are light and fast and hollow. Sparrows with fragile bones.

Your words are not like this. Your words are filled, their hollows crammed with meaning, things unsaid nested within, jammed with implication. It is a wonder they do not drop to the floor the moment they leave your mouth. I marvel at what you say and even more how you say it, how your words shift their shape and contain their intent until they are inside me and unpack their contents, to leave me in awe of their economy. So much said with so little.

I cannot do this myself. We speak the same language but build our words differently. Mine are simple and deliberate, yours effortlessly complex. You are not aware of the miracles you make of your words. I cannot do this myself; I do not even try, save when I am speaking your name. With those few words I am your equal, filling the words with complexity and light. Stained glass shining from the inside.

You are so used to what you do with your words that you do not notice the effort I put into mine. I don't mind. Take for granted that your name flows from my lips. It is a gift to me that you expect it there. Let me speak your name and fulfill your expectation.

I was not always in love with the spoken word. Those of you born to speech do not know how you tax the patience of those of us born to thought—how our first thought in hearing one of you speak is to wonder at the extent of your damage, to be curious at what sort of trauma could result in such an obvious and slow moving thing such as stands before us. We listen with politeness and internal pity: You cannot be faulted for the deficiencies to which you are born, and we would not choose to point out that they exist.

We listen and wait for our turn to speak, and then speak as slowly as you have been afflicted to do so. We try to get done with it as quickly as possible, because we know how much your sort wish to speak again, straining to pass along information along with asides and anecdotes and digressions and irrelevancies, leaving us to filter what you mean from what you say (We are no less verbose but at least we are quicker, when we talk among ourselves through our thoughts). And when you are done, again we speak, briefly and with economy and to the point, speaking what need be said and ignoring that which does not. For our courtesy we are labeled arrogant and curt. It annoys us.

In time I came to appreciate the spoken word, with its implications and intimations and allusions, with its potential of saying more than mere words, its palette of meaning richer and wider than I first grasped. And with that appreciation came exasperation at those gifted with speaking, who could say so much with what they said and how they said it, and chose to say nothing of consequence; who opened their mouth and allowed banality to fall out and thud to the ground; who were unaware that they could do with their words with the barest minimum of effort what I with all my desire could accomplish only haltingly, if at all. It was like being starved and watching those at a feast ignore the best dishes to fill up on bread.

If I could have I would have pushed their faces into their words, to make them see the parody they made of them. But they would have only have been confused and I would only have been more exasperated. There is a saying along the lines of not trying to teach a pig to sing because it wastes your time and annoys the pig. I want you to know how many times I have stood in pig-filled rooms, and longed to annoy.

I did not. I sat and listened to them talk instead, and was amazed to discover more in their words: subtext and overtones, emotional resonances that even those speaking did not know were there, the rhythm and pattern and tone of their speech opening them wide to be read. Books whose messages are not in the text but the footnotes. A library of the human experience.

It took time to translate the language, and I do not imagine I have mastered it. It will never be my native tongue. But I hear it well enough that in hearing it I see those who speak it anew, and once again I have

pity for those who speak aloud. Not because they speak so slowly but because so many of them are deaf to all that they say. If they could hear what I hear they would be amazed.

My native tongue is not a tongue but the flash of neurons decoded and transmitted by machine instead of muscle. But it is my tongue nonetheless: my tongue, my map, my window, my apprehension of the world to myself. I am leaving it behind to be with you. I am an immigrant whose first language will not be simply unused but amputated, the parts of me I used to speak it left behind, no part of who I will be to speak it, even in the silence of my mind.

You do not know how this worries me. It is not that I am to be made to speak aloud a language I love and long to hear but which I speak imperfectly. In time I will speak it well enough. I worry that who I am is in how I know to speak; that I am shaped by my words and how I say them, and that in my deprivation, that which is me will diminish and become something other than what I am and what I am to you.

I am doing something new. I am holding myself in my mind—who I have been and who I am—wordless and silent; no description to resolve into a lexicon spoken or sent, a view of myself immune to travel or translation or amputation. When I move to your world my thoughts will be filled with myself; the measure of my character and deficiencies and desires held mute and in being mute held whole, so that when I am sent to you, I will be who I have been and who I am, so I can be who I will become with you.

I know you would not begrudge me this, that you would want me to think on myself if by doing so I believed that it would keep me myself. But you should know that as I hold myself in my thoughts, to will myself into being myself once more, the version of me I hold to myself holds you in her thoughts. She holds you wordlessly: who you have been and who you are, and who you will become with her. She holds you in her without words or speech and longs to speak your name.

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Friendship

I rose early the day I killed my friend. I knew that when I killed him I would have to be ready, could not hesitate or be moved by his suffering, but be ready to strike swift and sure, and for that I needed to prepare myself. I needed not to harden myself but to be strong enough to hold myself open, to measure his pain not with detachment but with empathy, to strike him at the precise moment when the balance between his will and his suffering tumbled irretrievably against him; to allow him his struggle but not to struggle needlessly. I was to honor his final moments by judging when they would be, to do what he would not be able to do, and to give him the honor he was due from me and for himself. I rose early and spent the day in silence, and when I was ready and when the time had come, I took my knife and I went to him.

He did not answer his door; it was too late for that. His disease was untreated and untrammeled, sending the impulses of his nerves to bleed into his flesh, to twitch the muscle and fritter away any semblance of control. A friend let me enter and drew me to the rough mat on the floor, on which our friend sat and shook. I knelt in front of my friend and greeted him; drew my knife for him to see and placed it between us, not as a threat but as a promise, fulfillment of his request and my requirement to end his life.

He turned his head toward the knife and reached out a palsied hand to touch it, jostling it slightly as he did so. Told me it would serve, then reached the same hand to me, bidding me to take it. I found that I could not, the hand holding itself up for long seconds before retreating to its owner.

You blame yourself for this still, said my friend. You blame yourself for this disease you gave me, the one that will kill me today. It sits between us like an unwelcome guest.

I will not ask you to absolve yourself of this guilt. You have willingly picked it up and placed it on your shoulders. Only you will be able to set it down again. But know that I do not ask you to carry it for me. I would not have you think you are unworthy to touch my hand, you who are the only one I can trust and who I will trust in this final hour.

You afflicted me with this disease, took me far from my home and far from the people I love, and brought me to this moment. But you have also called me friend, understood me, and have given me honor and do me great honor now.

You have been long forgiven by me, and all that I would have between us now is companionship and love. You are my last and best friend. Remember that when your burden of guilt weighs you down.

And with those words my friend fell silent, curled himself small and began his wait, holding himself to himself as his body betrayed itself, scattering the messages between body and mind, pushing arms and legs, contorting his silent contemplation into a jester's pantomime, making a mockery of his dignity—but not so much a mockery that his dignity did not hold.

It was hard to watch him leak and spasm and grunt. But I would not turn away. I watched every moment, silent and observant, owing him witness for the affliction I gave him and the release I would yet give him, until the moment when I became aware with every sense that my friend had arrived at his moment of release. I did not hesitate. I picked up my knife and prepared to find his heart.

There is a moment of surface tension when a knife blade presents its demand and the flesh honors it. An instant of pressure before the puncture, the rip before the slide, a small eternity easy to miss but impossible to ignore if you've felt it before. I lived in that moment a great while for the small sliver of time it was there.

And then I moved on, angled my blade in and up, felt its tip pierce its target and slide through the other side, and continued on until the flat of the hilt rested cold on his chest. I moved in close and embraced him, the better to provide leverage to twist the blade, and make the argument to his heart that its work was forever done. The heart did not argue and for that I was grateful.

My friend gripped me as I gripped him, exhaling at the crystal clarity of the knife, cutting through his diffuse and random pain to rally every thought in his body, every final message that coursed along his nerves, toward the goal of reaching his hand to me a second and final time.

I took it and held it, and wet it with my tears as I bent to kiss it, an action which surprised me and released me, and let me lay my burden down. I'm sure my friend saw it in his failing last moment of life; his last gift to me and my last gift to him, so that all that was between us in the end was companionship and love. He died in my arms and holding my hand, and after a minute I set him down on his rough mat, stepped back to where his other friend stood waiting, and gave our friend's soul space to depart.

I did not say goodbye to my friend then, but some time later, as I held his body in my hands, floating in the cold and dark above the brilliant green world of his birth. A place I had come to fulfill a promise: to see him home, to return him to a place from which my actions had kept him while he was still alive. It was not easy to get there and it would not be easy to return, but I had risked my own death for reasons far more trivial. I would not shame my friend or myself by denying him his return home, because it would be inconvenient for me to take him there.

And so I floated above this great green world, body in hand, holding it longer than I should have, whispering words to it that would not carry in the vacuum but which I said nonetheless, before letting it go and releasing it to spiral into the gravity well of my friend's childhood world. My friend and I paced each other a while, sharing the same orbit, until I turned to make my way back to my own world. I did not turn back to see my friend fall away from me. I had said my goodbyes and was content to let him find his own way home.

I wonder if as he fell those he had loved felt him return home and felt his absence filled, as he shot across the sky and spread himself in it. I like to think they did, not because I am the one who took him from them, but because I loved him too, and in loving him felt his love for them. I hope they looked to the sky, saw him move through it, and were glad to have him home.

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Age

When you were born all you could do was cry. When I was born I woke to a whisper, giving me a name and telling me to come away from my cradle. I walked, one foot and then another, understanding fully without understanding how I understood. I turned to see my birthmates, all walking and all sending out their own names, and receiving names in turn. We were born and we were aware and we would soon be made to fight.

Our childhoods did not exist, except perhaps in the moment between being given our names and setting our feet on the ground. Once that step was taken we had a purpose, a call to action. We answered it unthinkingly, unaware of our options or that there were options—that concept left packed up for the time being because that was what was required in the moment—no more mind than it took to walk, one foot and then another, into the rest of our lives.

When you were two you had learned to speak and walk. When I was two I was made an officer—a lieutenant—to replace the one whose body had been bisected in front of me, dorsal and ventral peeling away from each other and falling sideways, the last thought he sent one of surprise at feeling a cool breeze between his front and back. And I, stumbling back with wounds of my own, holding my arm across my

abdomen to keep my insides in, at an age when you were pulling the heads off your sister's dolls.

When you were four you learned to read and tie your shoes. When I was four I attempted to negotiate a surrender, to keep my soldiers from having to risk their lives by having to take a settlement one hut at a time. There was no surrender and we went through the settlement, killing as we went and dying too, needless deaths all around, needless save to honor the death wish of the settlement leader, who preferred annihilation to life. I made sure I found him, denied him the martyrdom he imagined for himself, made him bury his dead, and gave him a cell to live a life which I hoped would be long enough to sprout regret.

When you were six you sat in school and learned to add two and three. When I was six I found you, or what remained of you—so much of you strewed behind you, along with the wreckage of your ship and your crew, and what was left of you alive only through luck and will and technology. You should have been dead when we met, and you should have died after we met, in the long minutes between finding you and saving you.

I remember touching your face and lying to you that you were all right now, seeing you weep and wondering if it might not be more merciful to let you die. But I had my orders to bring you back, so I did, knowing what it would mean for your life but not knowing what it would mean for mine. I was six when I met the person I would love, and became the person you would love again: the person I was made from, whom you met, or so you told me, when you were six.

Please understand me. I do not mean to belittle you when I note that I was leading soldiers at an age when you could barely control your bladder, or that I stood dazzled by three moons rising over a phosphorescent sea, lacking the poetry to match in my head the song in my eyes, at an age where you enjoyed the taste of paste and boogers and small coins.

You no more chose how to be born than I did, and your life is no more or less complete because you required two decades to become an

adult, and several decades after that to become a soldier, both of which I was from the moment I opened my eyes. I do not mean to demean you when I admit I find some amusement at the idea of you as a child, of you reaching no higher than my waist, of you big-eyed, and your big head wobbly on your neck, looking at the world with curiosity if not comprehension, needing to wait years to know enough to know how little you know.

I note these differences because they stand between us. When you speak of growing up and growing old, you speak to someone who did not do the first, and can choose not to fear the second. Every day of my life from first to this, in a body that defies both growth and decay, even if one day it cannot defy death. It is not eternal but it doesn't change, and if I chose I could stay in it for as long as I could manage. Timeless in my way, unyielding to both creation and destruction, and because of this separate from the human stream of age—the arc that bends from development to deconstruction, that gives definition to your days, provides sense of story and an assurance of all things in their season, and all of it coming to an end as natural and complete as its beginning.

I hear you speak of your childhood as the blind hear someone speak of the color of a flower or of a beloved's eyes; understanding that the color exists, understanding the emotion color can arouse, but lacking the experience that brings understanding into empathy, understanding a thing without feeling it deep in the brain, where the joy of it will shudder out, down the nerves to one's very fingertips.

Childhood is a country undiscoverable to me, something so far removed from me that I cannot even say that it was denied, because it was never something that I was meant to have. Nor is it something I desire, whose absence I resent. I am who I am and that is enough. It is simply that childhood is an experience we do not share, another place where our lives refuse to link, a commonality we do not have. When I think of you as a child it amuses me, and it makes me sad that you do not get to think of me the same way.

I am nine years old. In those nine years I have seen things that others could spend lifetimes and never once see. I have traveled farther than

entire millennia of explorers, their journeys laid end to end and back again. I have been on more worlds than we knew could possibly exist for all but the smallest slice of time our species stared up at the stars. I have measured a life not in teaspoons or tablespoons or ladles or jugs but in inexhaustible gouts of experience, pushing me forward into wonder and terror and being.

I am nine years old and I have lived in every moment of that life. No time wasted in idleness and futility, in routine and repetition, in grinding gears or marking time. You can't tell me I have lived less than those who have merely lived longer.

It does not matter: All these experiences and all this experience make no difference in how I am seen—how all of us are seen, those of us whose lives who begin *in medias res*. I am nine years old and must be what they remember nine-year-olds to be, seen, at best, as an idiot savant, a useful moron, a little girl in a big girl's body.

Those who don't belittle me fear me, me and mine; grown too fast, made too smart, too far out of their own experience to understand, assumed to be without morals because they would not have been moral at the same age. We are sent to do the things they judge necessary and yet fear to do—fine for us to be given tasks that might cost us our souls when we're assumed not to have souls at all. We learn quickly not to hold this fear and stupidity against most of the human race, because the alternative is to let you all die.

When I first decided to love you I needed to know how you would see me. Whether you like so many others would see a child in an oversized body, or someone who was your equal in everything but time. I waited for the moment of condescension, for the casual dismissal, for the instance when you would ask what I could possibly know, given how little time I could have known it in.

I am waiting still, but I no longer expect its arrival. You are not blind to my age or our differences; you know better than anyone how brief my existence has been, because my life could have only begun after her life ended. Perhaps you see me as a continuation of a life interrupted, or perhaps you simply don't care and see me as your equal because there is no reason not to. I have time to find out as our lives

continue, and we mark time not by what has come before, but by what we have together.

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Sex

I must apologize to you. I am sitting with you and you are talking to me, telling me about the world to which we are going, where you and I will start our lives together. I'm sure what you're saying is important—critical things I need to know, about a place I have never been but where I will spend the rest of my days. I am sure you are telling me things I need to hear, but I must confess I'm not hearing a single word.

Instead I am intent on your face, and the movement of your lips, and the memory of how those lips feel when they are on me. While you speak I am thinking of the last time we kissed, and the subtle friction that took place because we were so slightly out of sync, the rush of blood flooding our lips to make them softer, and make us more aware of just how many nerve endings each of us were pressing against the other.

Your words arrive at ears that are not deaf but disinterested, because although what you say is something I need to know, I know I can make you repeat it some other time. You will oblige me that way. And so I watch your lips purse and thin and tighten and repeat, knowing that the same motions can be used for other ends, and enjoying the memory of those ends achieved.

I apologize now because I am staring at your hands, which you use as punctuation—another layer of language to illustrate the point you

think I am hearing, but which in reality is flying past my head and falling into piles against the wall behind me. I realize that this is not like me, that you prize my seriousness and my ability to focus. You should know I am serious and I am focused, just not on what you'd prefer me to be. It is your hands that have my attention now, their short and choppy movements at the moment belying their startling fluidity as they move over me, and their strength when they lock with mine and press them down as you press your body into me.

There is an argument to be made as to which of us is stronger, but in the moment is not the time for that. Your strength is a sign of your intent and your request that I honor that intent. I've made the same request, and in the same way. I remember that you've honored it as well, hands locked and pressed and then released, to move with intent, another layer of language, to illustrate a point I want to hear.

I apologize yet again. This is a total loss. I am so far downstream from whatever it is that you've said that it would be impossible to catch up, and besides I am focused on other topics, about which I intend to make you presently aware. I am sorry that I have been entirely lost in your lips and hands and the memories of each on me. But you should know that I am going to make it up to you, and let you put them to what I feel is better use than the service to which they are put now. I think you will agree that all things considered, the purpose I have for them is a better one for all involved.

Even so I apologize for the inattention. I also apologize for surprising you just now, by knocking aside the table inconveniently set between us. And now I must apologize for upsetting your chair with you still in it, and for knocking your head on the floor. I will do what I can to make you forget your pain.

Sex with you is unlike any other sex I've had. I do not say this like one of the restless virgins of literature, swept up in swooning tides of bliss. I am not the swooning type. And while you are good, you are not that good; your mere touch is not enough to transport me to fantastical realms of ecstasy, or whatever ridiculous phrase one would use to express such an idea.

Sex is not a holy or sacred thing or a physical machine to express a separate emotion. I fuck to enjoy myself and to celebrate the fact I am alive. I understand the idea of making love, but it seems a bad way to go about it. I don't fuck to show my love. I love to show my love and let the fucking be its own thing. I love you and I love fucking you and I have no need to complicate either with the other. They are both true statements and they are both good. I am content to have them remain that way.

My sex before you was with my own, with those born as I was, who communicate as I do, equally adept at transmitting sensation and emotion whole and unrefined, over the same line as we send words. With us sex is not a matter simply of bodies, and of a pantomime approximation of knowing if what you are doing is working for those you are with. You feel what they feel and they feel what you feel, a positive feedback loop to take every thrust and pull and lick and touch, and magnify it until your nerves ring with your exhaustion, and the exhaustion of your partners.

It is needless to say what fun it can be. But it's also worth noting what it lacks. Being inside someone's head heightens the performance, and it makes you aware it is a performance: moves choreographed to increase pleasure, focused on the mechanics of sex but lacking in connection, ironic when you consider that your lover is inside your head as much as inside your body.

The first time we were together, I sent toward you to bind our thoughts and realized that your mind was shut to me; that not once had your mind been as open as your body. That you had lacked that dimension in your sex and always had. I pitied you. And then you put your mouth on me, and your hands, and I had nothing to do but focus on how you moved on me, and against me, and inside me.

And I realized that you lacked nothing; that in place of feeling your thoughts reflected in mine, I felt your desire and your inescapable need to be inside of me, not only with your body and not with your mind, but with every particle of your soul. I laughed and came at the same time, and wept as I tried to devour you, to own you and be every part of you as much as I was myself.

It was something I had never done before and will not do with anyone else. You opened me to desire, and I desire not to desire anyone but you.

I regret to say that we have made a mess of the room, but I do not regret to say that you are inside of me. We will reconstruct the room later, but for now I want to focus on what we are doing, which makes me wonder why I am bothering to narrate this in my own head, observing me observing you inside of me.

Now I remember. I'm observing this because I want you to know how I know the nature of desire, that I have learned it from you, and that I question whether desire is truly what I feel. I have taken the time to read on the nature of desire and have learned the physiology of it—the rush of chemicals through the brain, tunneling pathways and new connections. But among this physiology, the psychology, the warning that desire does not stay, that novelty wanes and desire wanders, looking for someone new to attach to, or simply wanders off leaving behind something else that may be as satisfying in its way, but is not desire.

If this is true then I am not now feeling desire. What I feel for you has not wandered or waned or lessened, but has grown since the first time you pressed your mouth to mine and served your notice that you had desires of your own. I look at you now even as you are between me, and would push you farther into me until there is no space between us, no gap between where I stop and you begin, but a continuum and a binding, covalent and irrevocable. If it is not desire I do not know what to call it, save to call it love, which I already feel in different ways than this.

I am without a word to describe what I feel, if it is not desire and is not love. So I will express it how I can, not in words but in action, with lips and hands and bodies and merging, with sex and fucking and release.

I have never been inside someone as deeply as I am inside you. I love to feel you inside me, the physical complement to my spiritual state, expression made flesh of what I would say to you if I had the

words. I press you into me, and draw into a kiss the lips that earlier had been speaking. I take the hands that had earlier moved in the air and bid you move them on me. Later you will tell me again what you had earlier said, and I will listen then, I promise.

But for now all I can say is that I apologize for wanting you, and in wanting you having you. And I apologize in advance for all the times I will want you between now and the end of our lives. If you can find it in your heart to forgive me I will make it worth your while, and will forgive you for all the times you will want me, and will accept your apologies, as you accept mine now.

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Fear

Fear enters the room and sits down in a chair and with a polite smile asks to open negotiations. Fear is small and hard and patient, and duplicitous, because in asking to negotiate it knows I cannot refuse. I am obliged to accommodate Fear because I am human, and no human is without fear. Fear sits and smiles and is predatory, immobile and silent and serene; an observer who conserves his energy and is content to wait. We watch each other and take our measures, he to undo me and me to avoid being undone. We both sit and measure and stare. And then because I long for other company, I ask him to show me what I should fear.

To begin he offers me the fear of death, and I laugh. I laugh because I know Death far too well to fear her. Death is my intimate and my companion; I am her messenger and handmaiden. We have walked too many worlds and have become too familiar; close acquaintances if not friends, because you can never befriend Death without embracing her, and for now I keep her at a safe and prudent distance. Even so I know her methods and her means and her agenda. I know her legendary capriciousness is overstated but that her inevitability is not. Death comes to us all, even those who have served her so well.

It is foolish to fear the inevitable. I know I will die. Fearing Death will not make her come for me later and might send me to her sooner,

when a blind rush from her sends me into her arms. I will not fear her and I will not fear going to her when it is time to do so. I tell Fear to show me something else.

He shows me Pain, myriad as Death is singular, creative in his attention-seeking, and in his desire to overwhelm every scrap of consciousness. The most perfect of egotists.

I am not impressed. Pain is a tool: a diagnostic instrument in one's self, a lever in others, and in all things symbolic of something else that better deserves our attention. Pain may represent Death, who I refuse to fear. Pain may represent power, which I also refuse to fear; I am better than those who would use their power to make me fear them, power predicated on the assumption that I will do anything simply to exist. They presume to hold my life in trust; my regret as I would end my life would be that I would not be there as they realized how little power they had over me. I choose not to fear the things Pain represents, leaving pain a process, a signal, a firing of nerves to be endured.

Of course Fear knows all this. Knows that I fear neither Death nor Pain, or those who use either to divorce me from my will. This is what fear does: presents you with what you can bear, so that when he shows you what is unbearable, you will open wider to let him feed on your heart. I know this and even knowing this does not keep me from a moment of satisfaction, and the hope that Fear will step away from my table. Fear allows you a moment to hope that he doesn't truly know what will break you. But he does, and he proves it to me by showing me you, and showing you without me.

This is what I fear. And I confess that part of me hates you a little for it, hates that you have taken my life and so threaded it with yours that I can't pull away without losing myself; I who had always been whole in myself but who now knows what she stands to lose in losing you.

It is not your death I fear, or separation. We have been at war as long as we have known of each other. Death follows behind us both, and separation has been what we have had the most of, our time together both trivial and precious measured against our time in absence.

Death and separation do not alter what is between us. What I fear is diminishment, and subtle change, and the moment in which a life without you becomes a sustainable thought.

It seems such a small thing compared to all the other things one may fear. There is no finality here; you and I would continue in our lives, no death or distance to separate us. Just disinterest, and the perception of what we have becoming what we once had, becoming memory and history and remembrance. What was separated from what is and separate from what will be.

A small thing and a survivable thing. And for all that the thought of it falls on me like wreckage and pulls into me to burn with sickening violence. I look across the table and Fear is gone, not because it has gone but because it has found the thing that will let it live in me. I fear a life without you and you without me.

I choose not to share this fear with you. You do not deserve to have it put on you. There has never been a time when you have not reached toward me, even when I had pushed you away (or, when we were formally introduced, when I threw you across a table). You never made me ask your forgiveness for being her, and you never loved me simply because I was the only part of her you had left. You have always seen me and you have always seen me with you.

I feel ashamed I have this fear, based on nothing real, called into existence by my own irrationality. I have so many excuses for it, beginning with my youth, and my inexperience in weaving my life to someone else's. But I will not rationalize this fear. It is what it is; the serpent in my ear, whispering the promise of the fall.

I am human. Fear lives in me and sets to make my heart bitter. But I know something about Fear. Fear is a scavenger who feeds on the future; on what may be and what is possible, extending down the line of our lives. Fear lives in me and I cannot change that. But I choose to starve Fear. I choose to live here with you now.

In the future perhaps we will diminish and we will divide, and all we will have is memory. I accept that this could be what we have in time, and in accepting it set it aside. What is left to me is this moment,

and you with me. I choose to be with you in this moment, to love you in the present time and in the present tense. It is all the time we have, have ever had, or will ever have. All of our lives here and now, wherever here and whenever now may be.

I love you now and will not regret having loved you and will not fear loving you forward. I am here now and I am with you. It is enough for as long as I have it.

With that thought I accept what I must from Fear and move toward you. Negotiations are closed, and you and I remain.

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Endings

It is time to come to the end of things and to the beginning.

I am standing in a room where there are two of me. One of them is who I have always been as long as I have had memory of myself. The other is who I will be, someone I will be poured into to become who I must be to start our lives together.

I cannot stop staring at her. I see myself in the curve of her cheek and the line of her nose and the length of her limbs. Through her I will gain many things I would not have.

I will gain a husband and a daughter and a new world, which I will not have to meet at the end of a gun, and whose citizens I will not have to defend or kill. I will gain a measure of peace and I will gain an identity that is my own—not one of a soldier or an officer or a killer, but simply Jane Sagan, whoever she may be.

She offers me so many things, she who is not yet me. And all I have to do for her to become me is to give up myself.

I give up myself in speed and strength; my new body has only what nature and evolution saw fit to provide, limbs weak enough to force the brain to better them, with spear and sword and bow, gun and gears and engines, every marvelous creation made by man to compensate for a body barely competent to carry its brain in its head.

I give up myself in mind, abandoning the fluid switch between machine and gray matter that extends myself into others, to disconnect my thoughts to them and theirs to me, to sever the connections that have sustained me. To shut myself off in my own head. To live alone with my thoughts, their echoes muffled in close quarters.

I give myself up in identity as a soldier and an officer and a killer, as a friend and a colleague, and as one by whose hand humanity keeps its place in the universe.

Make no mistake that I am weaker for the loss of each. Make no mistake that I will have to learn again how to fit myself into a world that no longer works like it should. Make no mistake that it will be through force of will alone, that my frustration and anger at being less than what I was will not be visited on you—that even in my newly weakened state I am still dangerous and liable to rage at what I have taken from myself, by becoming this new self.

The woman who opens her eyes in the body I see before me cannot be the same as the one who closes her eyes in the body I have now. Too much changed to remain intact, too much left behind that can't be brought over. I will hold my image of myself to me, but there is only so much of me that will fit.

If you knew all of this I know you would ask me to consider what I was doing, whether I was sure I was making the right decision, and that you would rather face a life without me than to have me choose a life I would not choose for myself. I know this is what you would say and do as well as I know myself.

And this is why I say with all affection that sometimes you can be such a stupid man. I wouldn't mind you feeling just a little bit greedy for me, that the idea of not having me would make you angry, not heavy-hearted and accepting. There are things you still have to learn about me and this is one of them. It is not that you are too considerate but that I don't mind when you tell me what you want and put that first instead of last.

I don't mind because that is what I am doing now. You should not think I do any of this for you, that I am committing a selfless act or an

expression of slavish devotion, that I have signed on for a mermaid's sacrifice and will walk on knives for dumb love. I am too selfish for that. I want you to know that I am here not for you but for me. I want you for my own. I want the life we will have together for my own. I want the silence of peace and release from being the one who walks ten steps ahead of Death. I want the honor of not being feared or hated, and of not having those be the correct response to my presence.

I want to be able to say that I have done my part and I have done it well, but that my part is over and now it is time for my reward, and that reward is you and this life. I want all of this and I am willing to pay to get it.

But it is still hard.

In this I imagine that I am now your equal: You once gave up a life, leaving behind a world and everything on it, all that you had been and everything you knew, on that single sphere of rock and air and water. You put it behind you and stepped into a new life in which you found me. I can't imagine that it was easy to do this.

But was it a sacrifice? Did it take from you more than you could bear? It takes nothing from what you did to say it was not, that you left a life that had nothing left for you except the marking of time. Hard though it may be, it is not a sacrifice to give up that for which you no longer have a use.

I am at that place now. This life has made me who I am and who I am no longer wants this life. I have seen so much of this universe behind a rifle and a mission. I am ready to see a smaller part of it in depth and in peace. It is not a sacrifice to pay for what you want though the price is high. The price for this new life is everything in the old one. You once gave up everything in your old life and gained me. I am ready to give up this life and keep you.

I rest in the container that holds everything I am but not anything I will be, and watch as the technician makes her preparations. You are holding my hand and telling me of what it was like for you.

I smile and I want to kiss you, but not here and not now. I do not want a last kiss in an old body and in an old life. I want a first kiss in a

new life, a promise fulfilled and no regrets. I am looking forward to that kiss. I hold it in my thoughts as I hold myself there and you there with me.

The technician looks at me now and asks me if I want to begin. I look to you and say I do.

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Appendix: Company D in Memoriam

In the transcription of ISC/IRI-003-4530/6(C) ("The Sagan Diary"), Lt. Sagan briefly recounts her first mission, the rescue and retrieval of 16th Brigade, Company D, which participated in the Third Battle of Provence. Lt. Sagan's assessment of the tactical qualities of Company D is overly harsh: the official history of the battle (CDFBA/OHR-003-1800/1(A)) clearly indicates that Company D fought tactically and well against a far superior enemy force, and was key in allowing later CDF forces to retake the planet. As acknowledgment of its sacrifice, we note the fallen members of 16th Brigade, Company D here.

Thomas W. Aldrich
Carl Anderson
LaLani Anderson
Will Anderson
Jason Arneaud
Sgt. Sue Arnie
Sean Baeza
Kathryn Baker
Patrick Baker
Nathan P. Bardsley
Kevin Barry
David Baynham
Sean Bell
Spencer Bernard
Moray Binfield
Diane Blum
Eric Bowersox
Joe Brockmeier
Justin Brown
Kevin Brown

Harvey Byas
Jose Cabanillas
Christopher Carrera
Matthew Carroll
Howard Carter
Dave Ciskowski
Joseph Collins
Bruce A. Conklin, Jr.
Karl Cook
Stephen Crowell
Rich Daniels
Christian DeBaun
Griffin T. Demas
Parker B. Demas
Jason Donev
John Doty
Christopher M. Downing
Amanda Dwyer
Gerard Fievet
Stephen Fleming
Steven Frame
James Franks
Darren Fry
Juan Fuentes
Janice Galeckas
Matthew Gallagher
Nathan Gendzier
Gerald Getz
Mike Goffee
Samuel Ray Granade
Jeremiah J. Griswold
David Gulick
Christopher Hamilton
Christofer Hardy
Stephen Kennedy Harrison
Rodney Haydon

Lorelei Heinmets
Rein Jacob Bandicoot Heinmets
Jason Henderson
Tillman James Hodgson
Tatiana Hodziewich
Billy Hollis
Kristian Holvoet
Robert Holz
Jonathan Hoopingarner
David Horst
Eric Howald
Butch Howard
Glenn Howarth
D. Geordie Howe
D. Geordie Howe (no relation)
Kenneth Hunt
Robert Jackson
Melissa Jankovic
Randy Johnson
William Johnston
Jason Julier
Mary Kay Kare
Ben Katt
Adam Kearns
Jerry Kelleher
Sean Kelly
David Kirkpatrick
Michael Kranjcevich
Brent Krupp
John C. Kulli
Bobby Kuzma
Ken Nozaki Lacy
Steve Landell
Michael LaSala
Rich Laux
Mathieu Lavigne

Jennifer Leo
Adam Letterman
Allen Lewis
James Lewis
Sean Li
Stephen Lichtwark
Matthew Lindquist
Willem Lohr
Joshua Lopez
John Elliott Lowe IV
Joshua Lowman
John Lowrance
Do-Ming Lum
Susan Mahaffey
Pedro Marroquin
Harry Mayo
Damian McCarthy
Timothy McClanahan
Jason McCulley
Chris McLaren
Phil Merritt
Paul Meyer
Godfrey Milan
Christopher Miller
Jason Mitchell
Stephen Mitchell
P. Janiece Murphy
Michael Myers
Robert Myers
David Nater
Benjamin Nealis
William Nealis
John Needham
Michael Nolan
Patrik Nordebo
Kelly Norton

John O'Neill
Anthony Parisi
John Peitzman
Alex Penchansky
Kurt Perry
Foster Piekarski
Michael A. Porter
Robert Presson
Bryan Price
Michael A. Putlack
Adam Rakunas
David E. Ray
Randall Richmond
John Romkey
Michael Rowley
Karl Sackett
Tomas Sanchez Tejero
Becky Sasala
Jack Savage
James Seals
Ian Seckington
John Clive Edmund Sheffield
Patrick Shepherd
Chris Shipley
Neil A. Shurley
David Smith
Michael Smith
Scot Sonderman
Blaine Spaulding
Hugh Staples
Erik Stegman
Charles Stewart
Stuart Stilborn
Gail Stout
James Courtney Stowe
Jennifer Strachan

Abi Sutherland
Todd Taylor
Charles Terhune
Jason Thurber
Howard Kai-Hao To
Eric Tolladay
Doug Triplett
Lauren Uroff
George Vaughan
Patrick Vera
Lee Walter
Nik Weisend
Bradley G. Wherry
Geraldine Winter
Paul Wood
Paul Worosello
Jody L. Wurl
Todd Yankee
Adam Ziegler
Zane L. Zielinski

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Author Afterword

On September 25, 2006, science fiction and fantasy author John M. Ford passed away. His loved ones suggested that those who wished to remember him do so by contributing to a book endowment, established in his name, which would benefit the Minneapolis Public Library. I had met Mike Ford only briefly, but a number of good friends and colleagues were close to him, and I wanted to do something to help get the endowment off to a good start. I offered a bound draft version of my novel *The Last Colony* for auction, and noted somewhat jokingly that if the bidding got to $5,000 or above, I would write a short story for the winning bidder, on the grounds that someone who bid that much *deserved* a short story.

As it happens, Bill Schafer of Subterranean Press had been trying to get me to write a story for him, set in my "Old Man's War" universe. So he asked me if I was serious about writing the short story for a $5,000 bid. I said I was; he bid that amount. And here we are: The John M. Ford Book Endowment is $5,000 richer, and I wrote the story you now have in your hands.

I don't want to overstate my relationship with Mike Ford; as I mentioned before, we had met only a few times, although each time was an enjoyable experience. Nevertheless, his warmth and kindness and wit enlightened the lives of people whom I have come to care about

in the science fiction community, and their memories and celebration of his life served as an inspiration for me in the writing of this story. I encourage everyone who reads this to seek out his work, which is eminently worth reading.

I'd also like to give a word of appreciation to Bill, whose positive delight in maneuvering me over a barrel to get a story out of me in no way diminishes the generosity of his contribution, which serves both to honor the memory of Mike Ford and puts books in the hands of readers. Bill's a good egg, and I'm delighted he got this story out of me.

—John Scalzi
December 16, 2006

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AFTER THE COUP

JOHN SCALZI

OceanofPDF.com

JOHN SCALZI

After the Coup

illustration by

JOHN HARRIS

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Author's Note: "After the Coup" is an original story featuring three of the main characters of The Human Division, *written for the debut of Tor.com in 2008. The events of the story take place several months before the events of* The Human Division. *Enjoy.*

—JS

"How well can you take a punch?" asked Deputy Ambassador Schmidt.

Lieutenant Harry Wilson blinked and set down his drink. "You know, there are a number of places a conversation can go after a question like that," he said. "None of them end well."

"I don't mean it like that," Schmidt said. He drummed the glass of his own drink with his fingers. Harry noted the drumming, which was a favorite nervous tell of Hart Schmidt's. It made poker games with him fun. "I have a very specific reason to ask you."

"I would hope so," Harry said. "Because as conversational icebreakers go, it's not in the top ten."

Schmidt looked around the *Clarke*'s officers lounge. "Maybe this isn't the best place to talk about it," he said.

Harry glanced around the lounge. It was singularly unappealing; a bunch of magnetized folding chairs and equally magnetized card tables, and a single porthole from which the yellowish green limb of Korba-Aty was glowing, dully. The drinks they were having came from the rack of vending machines built into the wall. The only other person in the lounge was Lieutenant Grant, the *Clarke*'s quartermaster; she was looking at her PDA and wearing headphones.

"It's fine, Hart," Harry said. "Enough with the melodrama. Spit it out already."

"Fine," Schmidt said, and then drummed on his drink some more. Harry waited. "Look, this mission isn't going well," he finally said.

"Really," Harry said, dryly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Schmidt said.

"Don't get defensive, Hart," Harry said. "I'm not blaming you."

"I just want to know how you came to that conclusion," Schmidt said.

"You mean, how did I come to that conclusion despite the fact I'm this mission's mushroom," Harry said.

Schmidt frowned. "I don't know what that means," he said.

"It means that you keep me in the dark and feed me shit," Harry said.

"Ah," Schmidt said. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Harry said. "This is a Colonial Union diplomatic mission, and I'm Colonial Defense Forces, and you don't want me seen by the Korba because you don't want my presence to be interpreted as provocation. So while the rest of you head down to the planet, and get to breathe real air and see actual sunlight, I stay up here in this latrine of a spaceship, training your technicians to use the field generator and catching up on my reading. Which is going well, incidentally. I just finished *Anna Karenina*."

"How was it?" Schmidt said.

"Not bad," Harry said. "The moral is to stay away from trains. The point is, I know *why* I'm kept in the dark. Fine. Fair enough. But I'm not *stupid*, Hart. Even if none of you tell me anything about the mission, I can tell it's not going well. All of you deputies and assistants come back to the *Clarke* looking like you've had the crap beat out of you all day long. It's a subtle hint." He picked up his drink and slugged some back.

"Hmm. Anyway, yes," Schmidt said. "The mission isn't going well. The Korba haven't been nearly as receptive to our negotiations as we thought they might be. We want to try something new. A new direction. A new diplomatic tack."

"A new tack that is somehow focused on me getting punched," Harry said, setting his drink back down.

"Maybe," Schmidt said.

"Once or repeatedly?" Harry asked.

"I think that would depend on your definition," Schmidt said.

"Of 'once'?" Harry asked.

"Of 'punched,' actually," Schmidt said.

"I already have very deep reservations about this plan," Harry said.

"Well, let me give you some context," Schmidt said.

"Please *do*," Harry said.

Schmidt produced his PDA and began to slide it over to Harry, then stopped midway through the motion. "You know that everything I'm about to tell you is classified."

"Good lord, Hart," Harry said. "I'm the only person on the *Clarke* who *doesn't* know what's going on." Harry reached over and took the PDA. On its screen was the image of a battle cruiser of some sort, floating near a skyscraper. Or more accurately, what was left of a skyscraper; it had been substantially destroyed, likely by the battle cruiser. In the foreground of the picture, small, vaguely-humanoid blotches seemed to be running from the ruined skyscraper. "Nice picture," Harry said.

"What do you think you're seeing there?" Schmidt said.

"A strong case for not letting trainees drive a battle cruiser," Harry said.

"It's an image taken during the recent Korban coup," Schmidt said. "There was a disagreement between the head of the military and the Korban civilian leadership. That skyscraper is—well, was—the Korban administrative headquarters."

"So the civilians lost that particular argument," Harry said.

"Pretty much," Schmidt said.

"Where do we come in?" Harry asked, handing back the PDA. "Are we trying to restore the civilian government? Because, to be honest about it, that doesn't really sound like something the CU would care about."

"We don't," Schmidt said, taking back the PDA. "Before the coup, the Korba were barely on our radar at all. They had a non-expansionist policy. They had their few worlds and they'd stood pat on them for

centuries. We had no conflict with them, so we didn't care about them. After the coup, the Korba are very interested in expanding again."

"This worries us," Harry said.

"Not if we can point them toward expanding in the direction of some of our enemies," Schmidt said. "There are some races in this area who are pushing in on us. If they had to worry about someone else, they'd have fewer resources to hit us with."

"See, that's the Colonial Union I know," Harry said. "Always happy to stick a knife in someone else's face. But none of this has anything to do with me getting *punched* in the face."

"Actually, it does," Schmidt said. "We made a tactical error. This mission is a diplomatic one, but the new leaders of Korba are military. They're curious about our military, and they're especially curious about our CDF soldiers, whom they've never encountered because our races have never fought. We're civilians; we don't have any of our military on hand, and very little in terms of military capability to show them. We brought them that field generator you've been training our technicians on, but that's defensive technology. They're much more interested in our offensive capabilities. And they're especially interested in seeing our soldiers in action. Negotiations up to this point have been going poorly because we're not equipped to give them what they want. But then we let it slip that we have a CDF member on the *Clarke*."

"*We* let it slip," Harry said.

"Well, *I* let it slip, actually," Schmidt said. "Come on, Harry, don't look at me like that. This mission is failing. Some of us need this mission to succeed. My career's not exactly on fire, you know. If this mission goes into the crapper, I'm going to get reassigned to an archive basement."

"I'd be more sympathetic if saving your career didn't require blunt force trauma for me," Harry said.

Schmidt nodded, and then ducked his head a little, which Harry took as something akin to an apology. "When we told them about you, they got very excited, and we were asked by the Korbans' new leader—

a direct request from the head of state, Harry—if we would be willing to pit you against one of their soldiers in a contest of skills," Schmidt said. "It was strongly implied it would make a real difference in the tenor of the negotiations."

"So of course you said yes," Harry said.

"Let me remind you of the part where I said the mission is going into the crapper," Schmidt said.

"There is a small flaw in this plan," Harry said. "Besides the part where I get the crap kicked out of me, I mean. Hart, I'm CDF, but I'm not a soldier. I'm a *technician*. I've spent the last several years working in the military science division of the Forces. That's why I'm here, for God's sake. I'm training your people to use technology we developed. I'm not training them to fight, I'm training them to twirl knobs."

"You've still got the CDF genetic engineering," Schmidt said, and pointed to Harry's sitting form. "Your body is still in top physical shape, whether you use it or not. Your reflexes are still fast as ever. You're still as strong as ever. Look at you, Harry. There's nothing flabby or squishy about you. You're in as good a shape as any soldier on the line."

"That doesn't mean anything," Harry said.

"Doesn't it?" Schmidt said. "Tell me, Harry. Everyone else on this mission is an unmodified human. Is there any one of us that you couldn't take in hand-to-hand combat?"

"Well, no. But you're all *soft*," Harry said.

"Thanks for that," Schmidt said. He took a sip of his drink.

"My point is whether or not I'm engineered for combat, I haven't been a soldier for a very long time," Harry said. "Fighting isn't like riding a bicycle, Hart. You can't just pick it up without practice. If these guys are so hot to see CDF in action, send a skip drone back to Phoenix and request a squad. They could be here in a couple of days if you make it a priority request."

"There's no *time*, Harry," Schmidt said. "The Korba want a combat exhibition tonight. Actually,"—Schmidt checked the chronometer on

his PDA—"in about four and a half hours."

"Oh, come *on*," Harry said.

"They made the request this morning, Harry," Schmidt said. "It's not like I've been keeping it from you. We told them about you, they made the request and ten minutes later I was being hustled off to the shuttle back to the *Clarke* to tell you. And here we are."

"What is this 'skill contest' they want me to have?" Harry asked.

"It's a ritualized combat thing," Schmidt said. "It's physical combat, but it's done as a sport. Like karate or fencing or wrestling. There are three rounds. You get scored on points. There are judges. From what I understand it's mostly harmless. You're not going to be in any real danger."

"Except for being punched," Harry said.

"You'll heal," Schmidt said. "And anyway, you can punch back."

"I don't suppose I can pass," Harry said.

"Sure, you can pass," Schmidt said. "And then when the mission fails and everyone on the mission is demoted into shit jobs and the Korba ally themselves with our enemies and start looking at human colonies they can pick off, you can bask in the knowledge that at least you came out of this all *unbruised*."

Harry sighed and drained his drink. "You *owe* me, Hart," he said. "Not the Colonial Union. You."

"I can live with that," Schmidt said.

"Fine," Harry said. "So the plan is to go down there, fight with one of their guys, get beat up a little, and everyone walks away happy."

"Mostly," Schmidt said.

"*Mostly*," Harry said.

"I have two requests for you from Ambassador Abumwe," Schmidt said. "And she said for me to say that by 'request,' she means that if you don't do them both she will find a way to make the rest of your natural existence one of unceasing woe and misery."

"Really," Harry said.

"She was very precise about her word use," Schmidt said.

"Lovely," Harry said. "What are the requests?"

"The first is that you keep the contest close," Schmidt said. "We need to show the Korba from the start that the reputation the CDF has is not undeserved."

"Not knowing what the rules of the contest are, how it's played or whether I'm even physically capable of keeping up with it, sure, why not, I'll keep it close," Harry said. "What's the other request."

"That you lose," Schmidt said.

• • •

"The rules are simple," Schmidt said, translating for the Korban who stood in front of them. Normally Harry would use his BrainPal—the computer in his head—to do a translation, but he didn't have access to the *Clarke*'s network to access the language. "There are three rounds: One round with Bongka—those are like quarterstaffs, Harry—one round of hand-to-hand combat, and one round of water combat. There are no set times for any round; they continue until all three judges have selected a victor, or until one of the combatants is knocked unconscious. The chief judge here wants to make sure you understand this."

"I understand," said Harry, staring at the Korban, who came up, roughly, to his waist. The Korba were squat, bilaterally symmetrical, apparently muscular, and covered by what appeared to be an infinite amount of overlapping plates and scales. What little information Harry could uncover about the Korban physiology suggested that they were of some sort of amphibious stock, and that they lived some of their lives in water. This would at least explain the "water combat" round. The gathering hall they were in held no obvious water sources, however. Harry wondered if something might not have been lost in translation.

The Korban began speaking again, and as he spoke and breathed, the plates around his neck and chest moved in a motion that was indefinably strange and unsettling; it was almost like they didn't quite

go back in the same place they started off at. Harry found them unintentionally hypnotic.

"Harry," Schmidt said.

"Yes?" Harry said.

"You're all right with the nudity?" Schmidt asked.

"Yes," Harry said. "Wait. What?"

Schmidt sighed. "Pay attention, Harry," he said. "The contest is performed in the nude so that it's purely a test of skill, no tricks. You're okay with that?"

Harry glanced around the gymnasium-like room they were in, filling up with Korban spectators, human diplomats and *Clarke* crew members on shore leave. In the crowd of humans he located Ambassador Abumwe, who gave him a look that reinforced her earlier threat of unending misery. "So everyone gets to see my bits," Harry said.

"Afraid so," Schmidt said. "All right, then?"

"Do I have a choice?" Harry asked.

"Not really," Schmidt said.

"Then I guess I'm all right with it," Harry said. "See if you can get them to crank up the thermostat."

"I'll look into it." Schmidt said something to the Korban, who replied at length. Harry doubted they were actually speaking about the thermostat. The Korban turned and uttered a surprisingly loud blast, his neck and chest plates spiking out as he did so. Harry was suddenly reminded of a horny toad back on Earth.

From across the room another Korban approached, holding a staff just under two meters in length, with the ends coated in what appeared to be red paint. The Korban presented it to Harry, who took it. "Thanks," he said. The Korban ran off.

The judge started speaking. "He says that they apologize that they are unable to give you a more attractive Bongka," Schmidt translated, "but that your height meant they had to craft one for you specially, and they did not have time to hand it over to an artisan. He wants you to

know, however, that it is fully functional and you should not be at any disadvantage. He says you may strike your opponent at will with the bongka, and on any part of the body, but only with the tips; using the unmarked part of the bongka to strike your opponent will result in lost points. You can block with the unmarked part, however."

"Got it," Harry said. "I can hit anywhere? Aren't they worried about someone losing an eye?"

Schmidt asked. "He says that if you manage to take an eye, then it counts. Every hit or attack with a tip is fair." Schmidt was quiet for a moment as the judge spoke at length. "Apparently the Korba can regenerate lost limbs and some organs, eventually. They don't see losing one as a huge problem."

"I thought you said there were rules, Hart," Harry said.

"My mistake," Schmidt said.

"You and I are going to have a talk after all of this is done," Harry said.

Schmidt didn't answer this because the judge had started speaking again. "The judge wants to know if you have a second. If you don't have one he will be happy to provide you one."

"Do I have a second?" Harry said.

"I didn't know you needed one," Schmidt said.

"Hart, please make an effort to be useful to me," Harry asked.

"Well, I'm translating," Schmidt said.

"I only have your word for that," Harry said. "Tell the judge that you're my second."

"What? Harry, I can't," Schmidt said. "I'm supposed to be sitting with the Ambassador."

"And I'm supposed to be in a bunk on the *Clarke* reading the first part of *The Brothers Karamazov*," Harry said. "Clearly this is a disappointing day for both of us. Suck it up, Hart. Tell him."

Schmidt told him; the judge started speaking at length to Schmidt, chest and neck plates shifting as he did so. Harry glanced back over to the seating area provided the Colonial Union diplomats and *Clarke*

crew, who shifted in their rows. The stands were half-sized for humans; they sat with their knees bunched into their chests like parents at a preschool open house. They didn't look in the least bit comfortable.

Good, thought Harry.

The judge stopped speaking, turned toward Harry, and did something with his scales that caused a wave-like ripple to go around his head. Harry shuddered involuntarily; the judge seemed to take that as a response. He left.

"We're going to start in just a minute," Schmidt said. "Now might be a good time for you to strip."

Harry set down his bongka and took off his jacket. "I don't suppose *you're* going to strip," he said. "Being my second and all."

"The judge didn't say anything about it in the job description," Schmidt said. He took the jacket from Harry.

"What *is* your job description?" Harry asked.

"I'm supposed to research your opponent and give you tips on how to beat him," Schmidt said.

"What do you know about my opponent?" Harry asked. He was out of his shirt and was slipping off his trousers.

"My guess is that he will be short," Schmidt said.

"How do I beat him?" Harry said. He slipped off his shoes and let his toes test the spongy flooring.

"You're not supposed to beat him," Schmidt said. "You're supposed to tie and then take a fall."

Harry grunted and handed Schmidt his pants, socks and shoes. "Am I correct in assuming that there are several species of legume that would do a better job being my second than you, Hart?"

"Sorry, Harry," Schmidt said. "I'm flying by the seat of my pants here."

"And my pants," Harry said.

"I guess that's true," Schmidt said. He looked at the nude Harry and counted the number of apparel he was holding. "Where's your underwear?" he asked.

"Today was laundry day," Harry said.

"You went *commando* to a diplomatic function?" Schmidt asked. The horror in his voice was unmistakable.

"Yes, Hart, I went commando to a diplomatic function," Harry said, and then motioned to his body. "And now, as you can see, I'm going *Spartan* so a midget can whack me with a stick." He bent and picked up his bongka. "Honestly, Hart. Help me out here. Focus a little."

"All right," Hart said, and glanced at the pile of clothes he was holding. "Let me just put these somewhere." He started off toward the human seating area.

As Hart did this, three Korba approached Harry. One was the judge from earlier. Another Korban was carrying his own bongka, proportional to his own height; Harry's opponent. The third was a step behind Harry's opponent; Harry guessed it was the other second.

The three Korba stopped directly in front of Harry. The one holding the bongka handed it to his second, looked up at Harry, and then thrust out his hands, palms forward, making a grunting noise as he did so. Harry hadn't the slightest idea what to do with this. So he handed his bongka to Schmidt, who had just come running up, thrust his own hands forward, and returned the motion. "Jazz hands," Harry said.

The Korban seemed satisfied, took back his bongka, and headed toward the other side of the gym. The judge spoke, and held up something in his hand. "He says that they're ready to begin," Schmidt said. "He will signal the start of the round with his horn, and will use it again at the end of the round. When the round ends, there will be a few minutes while they set up for the next round. You can use that time to rest and to confer with your second. Do you understand?"

"Yes, fine," Harry said. "Let's get to it, already." Schmidt responded; the judge walked off. Harry began working with the bongka, testing its balance and warp. It felt like it was made of a hard wood of some sort; he wondered if it would splinter or break.

"Harry," Schmidt said, and pointed to where the judge stood, horn raised high. "We're starting."

Harry held his bongka in both hands, chest high, horizontal to the ground. "Any last pieces of advice?" he asked.

"Aim low," Schmidt said, and backed off the floor.

"Great," Harry said. The judge blasted his horn and moved to the side of the gym. Harry stepped forward with his bongka, keeping his eye on his opponent.

His opponent raised his bongka, expanded his chest and neck by an alarming amount, emitted a deafening noise somewhere between a belch and a roar, and launched himself at Harry as fast as his little feet could carry him. The Korba in the stands, ringing the gym save for the small section for the humans, cheered mightily in a similar chest-inflating, burping fashion.

Three seconds later Harry was confronted by the fact that he had absolutely no clue what he was doing. The Korban had set on him with a slashing, dizzying array of bongka maneuvers; Harry blocked about a third of them and avoided the rest by stumbling backward as the Korban pressed his advantage. The Korban was whirling his bongka like a rotor blade. Harry realized that having the longer bongka was not an advantage here; it took longer to swing, block and attack. The little Korban had the upper hand, as it were.

The Korban lunged at Harry and appeared to overextend; Harry swung his bongka overhead to try to tap him on the backside. As he did the Korban twisted inside the arc of Harry's attack; Harry realized he'd been played just as the Korban viciously whacked both of his ankles. Harry went down; the Korban jumped back just far enough to begin enthusiastically tenderizing Harry's midsection as he fell. Harry rolled and blindly thrust his bongka at the Korban; somewhat improbably, it connected, poking the Korban in its snout. The poke fazed the Korban into stopping its attack and taking a step back. Harry poked it back a couple more steps and then stood up, testing his ankles. They complained but held.

"Keep poking him!" Schmidt yelled. Harry glanced over to snap something back, giving the Korban an opening. He took it, whacked Harry hard upside the head, then reapplied himself to Harry's ankles. Harry stumbled but kept upright, wheeling in a drunken fashion toward the center of the gym. The Korban followed, swinging merrily at Harry's already bruised ankle bones. Harry got the distinct feeling he was being toyed with.

Screw this, Harry thought, and stopped, planted his bongka firmly into the gym mat and hurled himself up the staff. A second later he was doing a handstand at the top of it, balanced by dint of his finely calibrated if disused motor control, courtesy of the Colonial Defense Forces genetic engineering.

The Korban, clearly not expecting this tactic, stopped and openly gawked.

"That's right," Harry said. "Come whack on my ankles *now*, you little prick."

Harry continued to feel smug about his plan right until the moment the Korban crouched and launched itself into the air with a push of its powerful legs. The Korban didn't make it as high as Harry's ankles. He did, however, get right on level with Harry's face.

Oh, crap, Harry thought, before the blinding crack of a bongka smashed across the bridge of his nose and robbed him of any further capacity for reaction, commentary or thought. All those things came back to him with blinding pain as Harry's spinal column compressed into the gym mat as he fell. After that there were a few moments of curiously distant sensation as the Korban's bongka dug into various parts of his body, followed by an even more distant blast of a horn. The first round was over. The Korba strutted off to the sound of belching applause; Harry propped himself up on his bongka and staggered over to Schmidt, who had found him a water bottle.

"Are you okay?" Schmidt said.

"Are you dumb?" Harry said. He took the water bottle and squirted some of the water on his face.

"I'm kind of wondering what the thinking was on that handstand," Schmidt said.

"The thinking was that if I didn't do something my ankle bones would be a fine powder," Harry said.

"What were you going to do then?" Schmidt asked.

"I don't know," Harry said. "I was in a rush, Hart. I was making it up as I went along."

"I don't think it worked the way you wanted it to," Schmidt said.

"Well, maybe if I had a second who told me these little bastards could high-jump two meters straight up from a squat, I would have tried something else," Harry said.

"Fair point," Schmidt said.

"Anyway, you want me to lose, remember?" Harry said.

"Yes, but we want you to lose by just a little," Schmidt said. "You need to keep it closer than this. Ambassador Abumwe is glaring a hole through the back of your head right now. No, don't *look*."

"Hart, if I could have made it closer I would have," Harry said. He drank some water and then stretched, trying to find a place on his body that didn't hurt. His left instep seemed the most likely candidate. Harry glanced down and was glad the Korban had not seemed aware that human testicles were especially painful when struck; his had managed to escape injury.

"Looks like they're ready for the second round," Schmidt said, and pointed at the judge, who was standing with his horn. On the other end of the gym the Korban was hopping from foot to foot, loosening himself up for the hand-to-hand combat.

"Swell," Harry said, and handed the water bottle back to Schmidt. "Words of wisdom for this round?"

"Mind your ankles," Schmidt said.

"You're a big help," Harry said. The horn blew and he stepped back onto the gym floor.

The Korban wasted no time fronting an offensive, charging Harry almost as soon as he was on the floor. A few meters out the Korban

kicked and launched himself into the air, claws out; he was aiming for Harry's head.

Not this time, you son of a bitch, Harry thought, and pushed himself back and toward the gym floor. The Korban slid just over Harry's head, slashing as he did so; Harry responded by bringing up a leg and delivering to the Korban's posterior a truly excellent bicycle kick. The Korban suddenly accelerated head first into the stands, colliding violently into several other Korba, whose refreshments went flying. Harry arched his head from a lying position to see the carnage, then glanced over to Schmidt, who gave him an enthusiastic thumbs up. Harry grinned and picked himself off the floor.

The Korban burst out of the stands, enraged and refreshment-coated, and launched himself once more and incautiously at Harry. Being suddenly and humiliatingly launched into the stands had apparently simplified the Korban's attack strategy down to *tear the human a new one*. Harry didn't mind.

The Korban approached and wheeled back to deliver a mighty blow, either to Harry's midsection or genital region, whichever was closer. Harry responded by holding steady until the last second and then shot out his arm. The Korban's forward motion smacked to standstill as Harry's left palm met the little alien's forehead. It was like stopping a particularly aggressive eight-year-old. Harry smirked.

The Korban was not amused at what it registered as a condescending defense maneuver on Harry's part; it burp-snarled its rage and prepared to shred Harry's forearm. Harry reared back his right arm to slug the Korban, distracting it, and then quickly retracted his left palm, made a loose fist, and popped the Korban in the face. The Korban snorted in alarm; Harry took that moment to bring his right hook square into the Korban's snout.

The scales and plates of the Korban's face puffed out as if the alien's head were a flower traumatized into blossom; they settled back as the Korban collapsed onto the ground. Harry kept him on the ground by kicking it viciously every time it so much as puffed a plate. Eventually

the judges got bored with this and blew their horn. Harry walked off the floor; the Korban's second came and dragged him off.

"I think you might have overdone the kicking," Schmidt said, handing Harry his refilled water bottle.

"You're not the one whose kidneys were mashed into pâté in the first round," Harry said. "I was just giving him what he gave me. He was still breathing at the end of the round. He's fine. And now the contest is closer, which is what you wanted." He drank.

A door opened on the side of the gymnasium and a forklift-like contraption drove in, carrying what appeared to be a large kiddie pool full of water. The pool was set down near Harry; the forklift then retreated, to reappear a minute later with another pool, which it set down near Harry's Korban competitor.

Harry looked over at Schmidt, who shrugged. "For the water combat round?" he ventured.

"What are we going to do, splash each other?" Harry asked.

"Look," Schmidt said, and pointed. The Korban competitor, now somewhat recovered, had stepped into his pool. The judge, standing again in the middle of the gym, motioned at Harry to step into his pool. Harry looked at Schmidt, who shrugged again. "Don't ask me," he said.

Harry sighed and stepped into his own pool; the water, very warm, came up to his mid-thigh. Harry fought back the temptation to sit down in it and have a nice soak. He looked over again to Schmidt. "Now what do I do?" he asked.

Schmidt didn't respond. Harry waved his hand in front of Schmidt. "Hart. Hello?" he said.

Schmidt looked over to Harry. "You're going to want to turn around, Harry," he said.

Harry turned around, and looked at his Korban competitor, who was suddenly about a foot taller than he had been, and growing.

What the hell? Harry thought. And then he saw it. The level of the water in the Korban's pool was slowly falling; as it did, the scales and plates on the Korban were shifting, sliding against each other and

separating out. Harry watched as the scales on the Korban's midsection appeared to stretch apart and then join, as the plates that used to be underneath locked into place with the plates that used to be above, expanded by the water flooding into the Korban's body from the pool. Harry's eyes shifted from the Korban's midsection to its hands, where its digits were expanding by rotating the overlapping scales, locking them together into a previously unknown dance of Fibonacci sequences.

Harry's mind thought of several things at once.

First, he marveled at the absolutely stunning physiology of the Korbans on display here; the scales and plates covering their bodies were not simply integumentary but had to be structural as well, holding the shape of the Korban body in both states; Harry doubted there was an internal skeleton, at least as it was understood in a human body, and the earlier puffing and expanding suggested that the Korban structural system used both air and water to do certain and specific things; this species was clearly the anatomical find of the decade.

Second, he shuddered at the thought of whatever evolutionary pressure had caused the Korban—or its distant amphiboid ancestors—to develop such a dramatic defense mechanism. Whatever was out there in the early seas of this planet, it had to have been pretty damn terrifying.

Third, as the Korban forced water into its body, growing to a size now a square of the size—and some terrifying cube of the mass—of Harry's own dimensions, he realized he was about to get his ass well and truly kicked.

Harry wheeled on Schmidt. "You can't tell me you didn't know about this," he said.

"I swear to you, Harry," Schmidt said. "This is new to me."

"How can you *miss* something like this?" Harry said. "What the hell do you people *do* all day?"

"We're diplomats, Harry, not xenobiologists," Schmidt said. "Don't you think I would have told you?"

The judge's horn sounded. The towering Korban stepped out of his pool with a hammering thud.

"Oh, shit," Harry said. He splashed as he tried to get out of his own pool.

"I have no advice for you," Schmidt said.

"No kidding," Harry said.

"Oh God, here he comes," Schmidt said, and then stumbled off the floor. Harry looked up just in time to see an immense fist of flesh, water and fluid dynamics pummel into his midsection and send him flying across the room. Some part of Harry's brain remarked on the mass and acceleration required to lift him like that, even as another part of Harry's brain remarked that at least a couple of ribs had just gone with that punch.

The crowd roared its approval.

Harry groggily took stock of his surroundings just as the Korban stomped up, lifted its immense foot, and brought it down square on Harry's chest, giving him the sensation of involuntary defibrillation. Harry watched as the foot lifted up again and noted two large hexagonal depressions in them. The part of his brain that had earlier marveled at the physiology of the Korba recognized these as the places where the body would take in water; they would have to be at least that large to grow the body as quickly as it did.

The rest of Harry's brain told that part to shut the hell up and move, because that foot was coming down again. Harry groaned and rolled, and bounced a little as the impact of the foot on the floor where Harry had just been caused everything to vibrate. Harry crawled away and then scrambled to his feet, narrowly missing a kick that would have sent him into a wall.

The Korban lumbered after Harry, swinging at him as the crowd cheered. The alien was quick because its size allowed it to cover distance quickly, but as it swung at Harry, he realized that its attacks were slower than they were before. There was too much inertia going on here for the Korban to turn on a dime or make quick strikes. Harry

suspected that when two Korba fought in this round, they basically stood in the middle of the gym and beat the hell out of each other until one of them collapsed. That strategy wouldn't work here. Harry thought back on the first round, where the smaller Korban's size was an advantage—size and the fact it knew its way around a bongka. Now the situations were reversed; Harry's smaller size could work to his advantage, and the Korban, in this size, wouldn't know how to fight something smaller.

Let's test that, Harry thought, and suddenly ran at the Korban. The Korban took a mighty swing at Harry; Harry ducked it, got in close, and jammed an elbow into the Korban's midsection. Whereupon he discovered to his dismay that thanks to their engorgement, hitting the Korban's plates was just like punching concrete.

Oops, Harry thought, and then screamed as the Korban grabbed him by his hair and lifted him. Harry caught hold of the arm lifting him so his scalp wouldn't tear off. The Korban commenced punching him in the ribs, cracking a few more. Through the pain, Harry levered himself on the Korban's arm and kicked upward, jamming his big toe into the Korban's snout; clearly it was the one body part of the Korban's that Harry was having luck with today. The Korban howled and dropped Harry; he flopped down and thudded to the floor on his back. Before he could roll away the Korban stamped on his chest like a piston, once, twice, three times.

Harry felt a sickening stab. He was reasonably sure he had a punctured lung. The Korban stamped again, forcing fluid out of Harry's mouth. *Definitely a punctured lung*, he thought.

The Korban raised his foot again and this time aimed for Harry's head, taking a moment to perfect his aim.

Harry reached up and grabbed the top of the Korban's foot with his left hand; with his right he formed his fingers into a point and jammed them into one of the hexagonal depressions as hard as he could. As he did, Harry could feel something tear: the fleshy valve that closed to

keep the water inside the Korban. It tore, and a spray of warm water pushed out of the Korban's foot and splashed over Harry.

The Korban offered an unspeakably horrible scream as the unexpected pain obliterated any other focus and tried to shake Harry off. Harry hung on, jamming his fingers further into the valve. He wrapped his left arm around the Korban's lower leg and squeezed, juicing the Korban. Water sprayed on the floor. The Korban hopped, frantically attempting to dislodge Harry, and slipped on the disgorged liquid. It fell backward, causing the entire floor to quake. Harry switched positions and now started pushing on the leg from the bottom, forcing even more water out of it; he could actually see the leg deflating. The Korban howled and writhed; he clearly wasn't going anywhere. Harry figured that if the judges had any brains at all, they would have to call the round any second now.

Harry looked over to Schmidt. Schmidt looked at him with something akin to raw terror on his face. It took Harry a minute to figure out why.

Oh, right, Harry thought to himself. *I'm supposed to lose*.

Harry sighed and stopped juicing the Korban, letting the leg go. The Korban, still in pain, eventually sat up and looked at Harry, with a look that Harry could only imagine was complete confusion. Harry walked over and knelt down into the Korban's face.

"You have no idea how much it *kills* me to do this," Harry said, reached out to the Korban's face and made a grabbing motion. Then he stuck his thumb out from between his index and middle fingers and showed it to the Korban. The Korban stared at him, not comprehending.

"Look," Harry said. "I got your *nose*."

The Korban swung a haymaker straight into Harry's temple, and the lights went out.

• • •

"That's really not the way we expected you to do that," Schmidt said.

From his bunk, Harry tried very hard not to grimace. Facial expressions hurt. "You asked me to keep it close, and you asked me to lose," he said, moving his jaw as little as humanly possible.

"Yes," Schmidt said. "But we didn't think you'd make it so *obvious*."

"Surprise," Harry said.

"The good news is, it actually worked for us," Schmidt said. "The Korban leader—who, incidentally, you caused to get drenched in fruit juice when you kicked your competitor into the stands—wanted to know why you let your competition win. We had to admit we told you to lose. He was delighted to hear it."

"He had money on the other guy," Harry said.

"No," Schmidt said. "Well, probably, but that's not the point. The point was he said that your willingness to follow orders even when winning was in your grasp showed that you could make short-term sacrifices for long-term goals. He saw you almost winning as making a point about CDF strength, and then losing as making a point about the value of discipline. And since he seemed quite impressed with both, we said those were indeed exactly the points we had wanted to make."

"So you have brains after all," Harry said.

"We rolled with the changes," Schmidt said. "And it looks like we'll come out of this with an agreement after all. You saved the negotiations, Harry. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Harry said. "And I'll bill you."

"I have a message for you from Ambassador Abumwe," Schmidt said.

"I can't wait," Harry said.

"She thanks you for your service and wants you to know she's recommended you for commendation. She also says that she never wants to see you again. Your stunt worked this time but it could just as easily have backfired. All things considered, you're not worth the trouble."

"She's welcome," Harry said.

"It's nothing personal," Schmidt said.

"Of course not," Harry said. "But I like the idea that I had choreographed having the crap kicked out of me down to that level of detail. Makes me feel like a genius, it does."

"How do you feel?" Schmidt said. "Are you okay?"

"You keep asking that same very dumb question," Harry said. "Please, stop asking it."

"Sorry," Schmidt said. He turned to go, and then stopped. "It does occur to me that we know the answer to another question, though."

"What's that?" Harry said.

"How well you can take a punch," Schmidt said.

Harry smiled, and then grimaced. "God, Hart, don't make me smile," he said.

"Sorry," Schmidt said again.

"How well do *you* take a punch, Hart?" Harry asked.

"If this is what it takes to find out, Harry," Schmidt said, "I don't want to know."

"See," Harry said. "I told you you were soft."

Schmidt grinned and left.

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About the Author

JOHN SCALZI is the author of several SF novels including the bestselling Old Man's War sequence, comprising *Old Man's War, The Ghost Brigades, The Last Colony* (a *New York Times* bestseller), *Zoe's Tale*, *The Human Division,* and *The End of All Things*. His other novels include the New York Times bestsellers Fuzzy Nation and Redshirts; the latter novel won science fiction's Hugo Award in 2013. He also won a Hugo Award for Your Hate Mail Will Be Graded, a collection of essays from his popular blog The Whatever (whatever.scalzi.com). He lives in Ohio with his wife and daughter. You can sign up for author updates here

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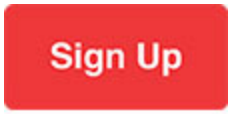

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